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VOL. 104.

THE TWO WIDOWS

BY ANNIE THOMAS,

AUTHOR OF »DENIS DONNE«.

IN ONE VOLUME.

BERLIN

JULIUS ENGELMANN, FRIEDRICH-STRASSE 249.

1875.

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THE TWO WIDOWS.

A NOVEL

BY

ANNIE THOMAS.

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JULIUS ENGELMANN.

1875.

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THE TWO WIDOWS.

A NOVEL

BY



BERLIN

1875

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THE TWO WIDOWS.

CHAPTER I.

HORATIA WALDRON.

FOR pathetic quiet beauty, that would eventually beguile you into loving it, whether your heart yearns for a freer bolder style or not, the English country may be challenged to produce a rival to Larpington. It spreads itself about in such peaceful languid loveliness over the slopes that incline gently upwards from the valley of the slowly crawling Larp, that a feeling of lull comes upon one directly its soothing precincts are entered. Its broad pastures and spacious fields of corn, its well-surrounded mansions, its capital farm tenements, and, above all, its weather-tight and moderately roomy cottages, all speak of prosperity and plenty. Evidently the labouring population of Larpington live like human beings. They do not merely exist under worse conditions than the majority of us assign to (such as we have need of) the brute beasts that perish.

It matters very little which way Larpington is entered: the approaches to it are all beautiful. But the one from the west—the road that runs through a wooded slope for four miles, and then dips down to the banks of the Larp and leads

right past the Bridge House into the village—is the most secluded, the most picturesque, and certainly the one a stranger would have been advised to take by Horatia Waldron if he were in quest of beauty.

Mrs. Waldron, at the date of which I am writing, was a widow, the mistress of the Bridge House, and in what people, who did not know what her requirements were, called »easy circumstances.« She always paid her rent and taxes, her butcher and baker. She was well-dressed, and those who had the *entrée* of the Bridge House declared that it was furnished with a degree of taste and beauty that must have cost fabulous sums. Nevertheless, and in spite of there being truth in this latter statement, Horatia Waldron was a poor woman, and her poverty galled her horribly.

Her occupancy of the Bridge House had extended over two years, and she was gradually doffing her weeds about the time of her introduction here. Her appearance two years before had created an enormous sensation in Larpington. As soon as she had been seen there had been formed a faction for and a faction against her. She was not the type of person about whom any one could preserve a strict neutrality. As far as she herself was concerned it was impossible to help liking her, and liking her warmly. But then she could not be accepted as an isolated fact. She had belongings, and she had righteous opponents; and both belongings and opponents influenced many against her.

She was past girlhood, and she was the mother of a pair of handsome, hearty children, but she

had not developed into stout matronhood. She was a fully-formed, gracious woman, but her waist was slender and supple, and her step light, true, and active as it had been when first she stepped between Arthur Waldron and prosperity. Her sweet oval fair face was unfurrowed, too, and there was not a silver thread in her very dark brown hair, nor a wrinkle round her long blue eyes that were so becomingly framed by their long black lashes. Altogether her admirers were quite justified in calling Mrs. Waldron a »very pretty young woman« still.

She was sitting in her pretty tastefully-adorned room one Christmas Eve, waiting impatiently for the arrival of the coach from the market town seven miles away. A visitor who would be her guest for a few days was coming, and as this visitor was her brother, and she had not seen him since her wedding-day, seven years before, her anxiety was a natural thing enough.

The leaping fire-light gleamed upon many fair things in that room—upon graceful statuettes and blooming flowers and shining silver and crystal (for the dinner-table was set, and Mrs. Waldron's little room was dining-room and drawing-room in one). But it fell upon nothing fairer than the black-velvet-robed mistress of all, who kept on getting up and peering out into the road along which the coach must surely come presently.

Once or twice, instead of looking along the coach road, she sent a steady penetrating gaze across the valley, where, in the middle of a well-wooded undulating park, a hundred lights flashed out from

what was emphatically *the* House of Larpington. If any one had been by to watch her, it would have been seen that her pale, mobile face flushed a little as she looked. But presently she turned away with a laugh, as two children hurled themselves into the room, regardless of the half-entreating, halfcommanding voice of the nurse which was echoing behind them.

»Miss Flossy—Master Gerald *do* come back; your ma don't want you, and she'll be fine and angry,« that functionary was saying. But as the mother turned to catch her boy, the already night-gowned rebel saw that there was no reproof for him in that quarter, and Flossy gathered enough boldness from his air of conviction to ask—

»Ma'a-ma!« in two long drawn-out syllables, »isn't it always ladies first?«

»Yes,« Mrs. Waldron said, encouragingly. »What is it, Flossy? Did Gerald want the first cup of milk, or the first bath, or what?«

»He wanted to say his prayers before me, and ladies must always be first, mustn't they, ma?« Flossy said, as coherently as her strong sense of injury in having been hurried in this matter would admit of her saying it.

On the whole it seemed better to Mrs. Waldron to leave the question of female precedence undetermined, rather than to risk controversy on it.

»It's a very proper rule, and it's much oftener honoured in the breach than the observance—which is all very beautiful but utterly beyond your understanding,« the mother said with a laugh—a proceeding which called forth a gentle, earnest,

passionately pleading, »*Don't* you laugh, mother,« from Flossy of four, and a blithe easy-going, perfectly satisfied, and utterly irrelevant rider from Gerald of three.

»I'm a funny boy, I are; what you down here in the dark for? aren't you afraid of Jabberwock,« (»Alice, in Wonderland,« be it understood, was the little Waldron's most familiar friend.)

»A real live Jabberwock is coming here by coach presently, who won't care for a view of your ripening beauties and a display of your dawning intelligence to-night, my dears. Now, my cubs, surge upstairs.« And Mrs. Waldron made a besom of her sweeping skirts, and flung herself into the spirit of the eternal nursery poem of »Such a getting up stairs,« in a way that would have seemed almost servile to any one who had never been cast for a similar part in the great drama of maternity.

As their rosy feet pattered out of sight on the topmost stair, as their resonant laughter rang through the ballustrades above her head, Mrs. Waldron turned back into her pretty, fragrant room, and resumed her watch at the window, but with a different expression on her face. She was radiant with the flush and light of pride and glory in the bonny pair who had disturbed her so unceremoniously. And as her eyes went out and rested on the lights that gleamed out amidst the trees, and made all Larpington cognisant of the unusual festivity that was reigning at the house, her lips formed the words, though no sound emanated from them.

»It's all my boy's, all my clever little Gerald's!« And as she said it to herself, her heart swelled

with an exultation that she did not for one moment scorn herself for feeling. Honestly, she had not a mean opinion of herself, because she thoroughly appreciated all the prospective advantages of being the mother of the future owners of The House and the Larpington property.

She had hardly time to get impatient again before the cutting trot of the four horses that drew the coach was heard on the hill. In another minute it pulled up, with a considerable amount of too-hooing caused by a struggle between a boy and a horn, at the hall door, and then, with a sigh of relief, she turned from the window, feeling sure that her brother Gilbert would be with her as soon as she was quite ready to receive him.

For the pretty graceful widow was essentially a practical person. She had not the well-oiled machinery at command which she would have liked to have brought into use on this occasion of her brother's first visit to her. A well-filled purse is needful for the perfect working of such machinery, and Horatia Waldron's purse was but scantily lined. But still, she was so accustomed to have everything fair and decent in her every-day life that, almost without design, she had organised a reception for this brother that could not fail to strike him pleasantly if he possessed either eyes, taste, or a heart.

In a moment she had lighted the candles on the little round dining-table—red wax candles that stood out superbly against the white cloth and silver that was polished until it looked black in the curves. »He'll wonder where he's to take his after-dinner

port, and where he's to smoke, and where he's to write his business letters,» she thought, with a laugh. »I'll show him how well he can do it here in this cabinet, until his nephew can receive him at The House.« This thought imparted more than usual elasticity to her step; it was almost with a bound that the young widow Waldron crossed the little hall, and made her way into the kitchen.

It took her about five minutes to taste, and stir, and season everything that was already prepared, into the last stage of perfection. The white soup, the well-hung leg of Dartmoor mutton, the boiled chicken and mushroom-sauce, the wild duck and the plain pudding, were each and all »successes.« And feeling sure of this, she went back to receive and welcome her rich, fastidious brother with a light heart.

For she wanted to please him. It was needful for her well-being that her brother, Gilbert Denham, should incline favourably towards her. And if a daintily-devised and prepared dinner would make him more amenable to her advances, was she not justified, as woman and mother, in so devising and preparing it?

She stood waiting under the shade of the dark ruby velvet *portière*, the light of the candles behind her showing her figure ont well, as her brother, with a great rush of fresh, frosty air, and a great bustle of port manteau, and hamper, and travelling case, and strapped-up rug, came into the little hall. He was half-blinded, half-dazzled. Somehow or other he had expected something utterly different. He blinked away the surprise and the steam which

had coagulated on his eyelashes in a moment, though, and exclaimed,

»Why, Horry, how well you look! A prettier woman, by Jove! than you were the day that you made that little mistake!«

He had divested himself of his big frieze coat while he was speaking, and she led him into her small, luxurious room before she ventured to make any reply. Then she put her hands on his shoulders, and made him face her fully as she said,

»Do you want me to go on loving you as I have always loved you, Gilbert?«

»Yes; what's the matter?«

»Nothing, nothing. Am I crying? What a fool I am to do it when I want to look my prettiest for you! Don't speak of my marriage as a mistake, Gilbert. I was very happy while Arthur lived, and I'm happy now with two rather nice cubs; and I shall be happiest of all when I see my little Gerald *there*.« And as she spoke the last words she drew the window curtain back, and pointed out The House flashing out at all points to her brother.

»Ah, well!« he said, calmly following the direction of her hand with his eyes, but going on quietly wiping down his big beard and moustache all the while; »not a bad place, is it, eh? Hope your little man will get it in time. But hadn't you better see about having that hamper unpacked? Mrs. Denham stuffed everything into it that she could lay her hands on in the larder; and, by the way, she sent her love, and hoped you wouldn't be offended at her sending it at all.«

»Why wouldn't she come with you, Gilbert?«

Horatia asked the question gravely, and gravely her brother contemplated her before he spoke. Then he said,

»She stayed away—much as she wished to see you—for your sake, little woman. I had to give her the hint to do it. My wife is one of the best creatures in the world; but it wouldn't improve your position with the woman in The House up there for it to get abroad, down here, that Mr. Gilbert Denham was one of your nearest of kin.«

»Gilbert, I'm ashamed of you!« his sister broke out, passionately. »From the moment of her coming into it, Bessie has been good, true, generous, and loving to every member of our family; and as to 'that woman up there,'—do you think I can——«

»Now stop, don't go off with that high falutin,« he laughed, good—temperedly. »Bessie won't misunderstand you for a minute, and you must care about complicating your position in the eyes of that woman. By the way, has she asked us to dine with her to-morrow?«

»No; but she actually came down and excused herself for not doing so. She said her table was full, and she was sure it would be so much pleasanter for me to be alone with you after such a long separation.«

»She's right there,« Mr. Denham said, in a satisfied tone, as the soup went off. The key-note was struck in a way he liked. After such soup, it was not at all likely that any portion of the dinner would be flat, tame, and unprofitable.

»She's right there; but still, if she does not invite me, you must invite her.«

»And she won't come.«

»Does she never come?«

»Yes, to pay a state call sometimes. It makes me sick to see her horses prancing outside my little garden gate, and to hear her carriage door bang, and to see her servants' liveries. They all sound of money-gleam and shine with money.«

»But she never comes to partake of your elegant but unpretentious hospitality?«

»I have never been idiotic enough to invite her.«

»My dear Horry, you're right, quite right. Not but what I see you could give her as good a dinner as her *chef* could possibly turn out up there; but that's not the point. I'm glad you have not been in the habit of interchanging unnecessary civilities. Dustom would clog and hamper us if you had; and when I begin to deal with Mrs. Waldron, of Larpington House, I don't mean to be clogged and hampered by anything.«

»Oh!« Horatia burst out, with one of her sudden glows of enthusiasm, »when you've dined—I mean when you've rested,—you must come up and see the children. The boy you're going to work for will inspire you—«

»Not a bit of it,« her brother laughed out, cheerfully. »The thought that I may be the means of exploding a fraud and ousting an impostor will inspire me. However, I'll go and look at the young ones presently. I suppose you like them?«

He was a handsome, tall, stalwart man, this Gilbert Denham. Clever, too, and courageously resolved upon taking his own way, whenever his own way seemed good to him. Some years before Ho-

ratia's marriage with the youngest son of the Waldrons of Larpington, he had been in practice in London as a solicitor. While there he had arranged some business matters sharply and satisfactorily for the wealthy widow of a city man; and by-and-bye he had married her, and had ever since been uniformly happy with her, though some of his former friends insisted on regarding him as a man who was marred by his marriage.

Circumstances had induced Gilbert Denham to go abroad, soon after his sister Horatia's wedding; and circumstances had kept him there until just before this story opens. This fact must be taken into consideration when it is stated that he knew very little of the conditions of her life at Larpington.

»Had you any suspicion before Arthur died, or had Arthur himself any suspicion, that it was not all fair and above-board with his brother's widow?« Mr. Denham asked, as he sipped his wine, and forgot to wonder (as she had expected he would) »why Horry didn't go into another room.«

»Not the very slightest; and if Arthur had he never told me. But he never saw her, you must remember that.«

»And what induced you to come and settle here when you heard that the place was left to her, and that your boy was cut out of it?«

»Instinct, inspiration; I don't know what it was made me come. I was so wretched when he died that I wanted to be *more* wretched; don't you know the feeling? It's like pressing on a nerve when your tooth aches to make it ache more; don't you know?

»I was never guilty of that special form of folly,« he laughed; »but go on.«

»Well, when I came and saw her, the instant I saw her I believed that I was brought here for Gerald's ultimate good. It flashed into my mind at once, and I think the flash was reflected on my face, that she hated my being here, that she had a motive for hating my being here, and that there was something wrong about her being in possession of Larpington House. That has been the steady conviction of my mind, Gilbert. I'm waiting here to find out how she won him to commit such an injustice, or how she got it committed if he didn't do it.«

»Don't hint at her having forged a will, my dear,« he said, coolly; »it might be unsafe to do so to any one but your devoted brother.«

»That's all the story I have to tell, Gilbert,« she answered, smiling, and calming down prettily at once; »but you look in that woman's face when she knows what you are, and judge for yourself if I have founded my story on fact or fiction.«

»I'll do so, Horry, dear; and now take me to see your children. I'm glad you can put me up here. I half expected, from your way of speaking of your house, that I might be relegated to the village inn.«

He followed her up, and she led him to the side of a crib, where a child, with its limbs tossed into every portion of the crib where they ought not to have been, and its long auburn hair floating over the pillow, was sleeping soundly.

»The future master of Larpington is a fine little fellow,« he said, warmly.

»This isn't Gerald; my children are rather punctilious, and always insist on the rule of 'ladies first' being attended to. This is Flossy.«

»And where's the boy?«

»Here's the boy,« a clear treble answered from the other side of the room; and looking round, they saw Gerald, with wideopen eyes, taking in all the details of the scene, »What are you for? Are you come to play wild beast? Mamma's a pig sometimes, and I'm a bullock. You crawl on your stomach, and be an elephant, and I'll ride on your back.«

»The plan is a remarkably pleasing one; but we won't carry it out just now,« the uncle said, laughing. And then a hailstorm of questions fell from both children. »Who's the man?« »Is he here with mamma?« »What for, then?« »Has he any sweeties?« »Has he any dolls?« And so on until the chorus became a sleepy one, and the babies drifted off into the happy fairyland of dreams, while the elders went down and discussed some of the stern realities that were about them.

»Were your husband and his brother on friendly terms?« Gilbert asked, after a time.

»On very friendly terms. I never knew brothers more fondly attached than they were to each other. George Waldron had been more like a father to Arthur than a brother.«

»Yet George Waldron went and married some woman whom he never saw fit to introduce to Arthur, and died without mentioning the fact of his

marriage, and most unrighteously left all his property away from his brother's son. I don't understand it.»

»What will you say when you have seen that woman?« Horatia cried, with a thrill. »You never read the reason in her face. She's utterly hateful.«

»Peace on earth, good-will towards men!« chanted out the waits; and Horatia rose, saying,

»It's past midnight; I'll say good night to you, Gilbert, dear, for I want to be entrenched in a stronghold of calm watchfulness when the meeting comes off to-morrow between Mrs. Waldron of Larpington House and little Gerald's clever friend.«

CHAPTER II.

»THAT WOMAN.«

THE distance from Mrs. Arthur Waldron's house to the church was very short, but it was long enough for her to encounter the disturbing element of her life, as she trod it the next morning with her brother Gilbert. She heard it—she *felt* it coming before she saw it. There was a clear, clanging noise of horses' hoofs on the iron-bound ground, and the rolling carriage wheels actually made the road quiver. »They are going to pass us,« she said to her brother; »look at her, Gilbert.«

He was by his sister's side on the raised path, and the carriage was close behind them as she said this. He had barely time to notice the extreme beauty and delicacy of the young widow's face, seen for the first time by daylight, before the other widow—the owner of The House—the great lady of Larpington was abreast of him. And he turned his head and looked at her.

The carriage was a light, well-built, double brougham; the horses, a pair of showy, high-stepping chestnuts; the harness, silver-mounted and liberally adorned with the crest of the Waldrons. Everything was well done, in so far as each individual thing being of the best material and best workmanship. But everything was overdone—was

ostentatiously done—was evidently suggested and ordered by the taste of some person, or persons, who liked to hear the chink of the red gold, and to see the gleam of it whenever occasion offered.

The brougham windows were closed, but on the side nearest to them a face was dimly visible through the glass. A large, checked, *steady* face. That was the sole impression on Gilbert Denham.

»That woman would do a thing very strongly,« was the thought that was passing through his mind when his sister muttered,

»That was Mrs. Waldron; could you catch sight of her daughter?«

»Has she a child? No, I only saw one—lady.« He hesitated slightly before speaking the last word, and his sister glanced at him triumphantly.

»She did not strike you as being 'a lady,' Gilbert. I'm sure she didn't; I had the same feeling the moment I saw her first.«

»We're at the church door, dear,« he answered, looking kindly down into her eager face, »let us leave envy, hatred, and malice outside.«

»I haven't a spark of either in my composition,« she hastily whispered in reply, »but—I'm Gerald's mother, and he has only me—and you.«

As became the beauty and prosperity of Larpington, its church was a fine and handsome one. It had been erected early in the fifteenth century, and the ravages of time had been admirably and artistically restored by Arthur Waldron's father. Unfortunately, for the church, Mr. Waldron paused on the completion of the necessary massive repairs, and went over to the Roman Church, before any

of the decorations and adornments could be designed and selected for the further beautifying of the edifice, that now always gave one the impression of wanting warmth and colour. Nevertheless, though some things might with advantage have been different in Larpington church, there was also much that was fair and pleasant to behold. In the first place there was a large congregation of really earnest-looking worshippers. In the next place there were no high pews, and in the third place there was a good out-spoken, clear-headed, warm-hearted man to pray for and to preach to them.

Mrs. Arthur Waldron led the way to her seat, about the middle of the centre aisle, dropped on her knees there, and tried to pray. Her heart ached with a strong sense of her own wickedness, as she felt in the midst of it that she *must* indicate to her brother the position of the Larpington House people. She *must* for little Gerald's sake, give him every opportunity of seeing »that woman« on all sides.

»The long front seat—right under the reading-desk,« she found herself whispering; »the violet velvet is the daughter.«

The »violet velvet« indicated—at whom Gilbert Denham discreetly did not look in the face of the whole congregation—was the costume of a tall, well grown, shapely young woman, with a fine Napoleonic face. Lovers of refined beauty would have found this handsome girl wanting in most of the points of blood and breeding. But those who regarded stature and size, and firmness of flesh as the most desirable qualifications, would

have had nothing to wish for when gazing on Miss Emmeline Vicary's stalwart, healthy young figure, and clear complexioned, dauntless young face.

On the way home Gilbert said,

»You never told me there was a daughter.«

»No; I forgot her; she's not a Waldron, thank goodness; she's utterly unimportant,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron answered, carelessly.

»Is she? My dear Horry, she's splendidly handsome, and no splendidly handsome woman is unimportant in this world.«

The pretty graceful woman—who was to Miss Vicary as a gazelle is to a milch cow—looked up surprised into her strong, handsome brother's face.

»Don't admire her, Gilbert—you have seen better things,« with a little unconscious toss of her own pretty head; »but I don't want to talk about 'Melly,' as her mother calls her; did you look at Mrs. Waldron's face?«

»No; but I looked at Mrs. Waldron's hand, and her strongest card is her daughter.«

Mrs. Arthur Waldron walked back to her orderly little home, where an exquisitely appointed little luncheon awaited them, in a bitterly disorderly spirit. It is always cruelly hard on a sister when a brother who is dear to her openly avows his admiration for a woman who is the very opposite of all she (the sister) considers excellent in woman. It is harder still when the admired woman may be one whose influence may be very deleterious if brought to bear upon the brother against the disapproving sister.

Accordingly, knowing this truth well, though

she had never experienced the force of it yet, Horatia took off her bonnet in a sort of resigned way, and then went into the nursery and gathered her children about her for comfort.

It seemed hard to her—hard and horrible that with that boy of her's within call, her brother Gilbert should permit himself to think the daughter of that boy's natural enemy pleasant to look upon. To be sure Gerald had exercised his gay fancy about his uncle at breakfast in a way that spoiled that gentleman's appetite. Gilbert Denham was not accustomed to have a pattern drawn on his back with yolk of egg, nor to have his slipper wrested from his foot, and see milk poured into it for »Tittums,« nor was the poetry of motion very apparent to him when his small nephew danced »a passion dance« because he was refused unlimited lumps of sugar. But though Gerald had been naughty, his mother believed in her innermost soul that he had been charming in his naughtiness. And it savoured to her of evil witchcraft that her brother had been made to forget for a moment that the bulky beauty who had won commendation from him belonged to the household of the enemy of her boy.

Thinking of these things made her regardless of the rites of hospitality. She had been more than half-an-hour scrambling about the nursery floor playing their favourite game of »wild beasts« with her children, when her housemaid appeared, deferentially,

»I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I thought you were in the drawing-room all the time, till this minute. Mrs. Waldron and Miss Vicary are calling here.«

She got up from her blithesome play with every nerve aching, every vein tingling with the firm conviction that this was a crisis in her destiny—*not* in her's but in Gerald's. In Gerald's! A crisis in the destiny of the dark eyed, winning faced darling now burying his head in her dress, and beseeching her not to go down to any nasty people, but to stay and play at Jabberwockes and buffaloes with him.

She was not at all addicted to the *tableaux vivants* business with her children. A charming actress, she never acted in real life *consciously*, though she was always getting wonderfully dramatic effects out of what would have seemed meagre materials to most people. But now she caught up her boy, and carried him down, kicking and struggling with pleasure, on her arm, and appeared before the trio a revised and improved »Medea,« without Jason and with only one child.

It has been said that she carried comfort and elegance into all the arrangements of her everyday life because these were essential to her. That is to say, she would have them when she could; it would never have occurred to Horatia Waldron to go without them because no one was by to see that she had them. So now the scene upon which she entered was as fairly set as if she had expected an audience. It was all rosy, light, and floral fragrance, and order, and beauty, of the light, airy, graceful sort. And her brother Gilbert, her handsome, tall, alert, vigorous brother solidified it all as it were, and gave it breadth and tangibility.

He was sitting easily on a chair a little way

removed from two ladies who were on the couch, and to whom he was talking animatedly and well. Horatia felt with a pang almost that he was exerting himself to please them. To please them — those women who had ousted Gerald from his own.

She was in their midst almost before they saw that the door had opened, with the boy in her arms. But in a moment he was on the floor holding his mother's hand, trotting out towards them with the fearless unsuspicion of his age. It seemed like a little act from a play even to his mother, when in answer to the elder visitor's question of, »Well, my dear, who are you?« the baby answered,

»I'm Gerald Waldron of Larpington.«

It was a formula taught him by his nurse in case he should ever be lost. But simple as it was it brought the colour to Mrs. Waldron's face.

»You've taught your little boy to speak plainly I must say, Mrs. Arthur,« she said, shaking hands with her hostess. And Horatia reared her head before the blast, as it were, and answered,

»Oh! yes; but he'll speak plainer by-and-bye. I must apologise to you for not having been here to introduce my brother, Mr. Denham.«

»We made out an acquaintance before you came in,« Mrs. Waldron said, affably. »And now I hope you will overlook the want of ceremony in what Melly and I have done in quite a friendly way; we want you and your brother to come and dine with us to-night; there are many families from the neighbourhood coming that I should really like to introduce you to.«

She was a thorough woman! and while this speech was being spoken there was a sharp struggle in Horatia's breast. It was hard — it was pitiful — it was *unjustly* hard that she should be put in the position of the patronized one. This reflection obtained for about a moment. Then, of course, she remembered Gerald, and all Gerald's claims upon her long-suffering and forbearance — for was she not his mother?

»Gilbert shall see all he can of the odious pair,« she determined. And then she answered, quite suavely and politely,

»I am sure we shall be very happy; may I answer for you, Gilbert?«

And Gilbert, rather briskly, told her »Yes, she might.«

The guests rose to remove themselves as soon as they had ascertained that their hospitality was accepted. As they got up and made for the door, it seemed to slender Horatia that the room was full of them — they were so lavishly endowed, both by nature and art. Their tall frames seemed to stretch up to the ceiling, and their voluminous skirts filled the room. »Are they camels, or elephumps, mamma?« little Gerald, whose mind was fraught with »wild beasties,« asked.

No wonder that practical little Gerald asked the question. They were a brace of »fine women,« undoubtedly, those two who were just making their exit. They were singularly alike, too, at the first glance, though on closer inspection there were many marked points of difference between them. They were alike in being tall, in being shapely, and in

having a free, easy, assured carriage. They were alike in having a strong expression of determination stamped upon their faces. But they were utterly unlike each other in manner and colouring. The daughter, although she missed the more delicate touches of breeding and blood, had about her a wealth of repose. The mother was restless and watchful. The daughter had gray eyes, and smooth, straight masses of hazel-nut-coloured hair, and a complexion that was white and opaque as milk. The mother's flashing black eyes, crisp, curly black locks, and transparent olive cheeks might have enabled her to pass for a gipsy. Again, the daughter looked older than the twenty years with which she was accredited in Larpington; while the mother looked younger than she could possibly be to have such a daughter.

They were both handsomely and elaborately dressed—Mrs. Waldron in black velvet and sable, and Miss Vicary in the before-mentioned violet velvet, about which were soft bands of chinchilla. Altogether they were a striking pair; and Horatia saw with a sickening sense of chagrin, that as women her brother thought them far from contemptible.

»I wonder why they want to get hold of you,« she began, as soon as they were gone.

»I can't get up a wonder about your sister-in-law asking us to dinner,« Gilbert answered, carelessly.

»Don't get into the habit of believing there is a motive and a mystery in their simplest actions. If you do that, you'll abolish all chance of any real mystery which there may be ever being arrived at,«

»It's a relief to hear you speak in that way. Gilbert, even you admit the possibility of there being a real mystery. I was afraid they had cast such a glamour over you that you would doubt everything but their integrity.«

»That's another erroneous conclusion,« he said, with a laugh. And then little Gerald was sent to his nursery, and the brother and sister sat down to luncheon.

»It's so bright and clear; shall we go out and have a look at the place, Gilbert?« Mrs. Arthur Waldron asked, when the luncheon had been removed, and her brother had changed his position five or six times, and stifled five or six yawns, after the manner of busy men who are suddenly transplanted into a soil in which they find nothing to do.

»Yes, if you like. What place?«

»Why, the place that ought to be Gerald's—Larpington House and Park,« she replied, quickly.

He laughed. »Your maternal faith in Gerald's right divine to the property is very beautiful, Horry, dear. With all my heart I hope he may be the rightful heir, and not a mere young pretender; but from what I heard at the time, the terms of George Waldron's will were very explicit.«

»They were,« she said, sadly. »Everything was clearly and unconditionally left to his wife. He must have been under a hideous spell,« Horatia went on, waxing wroth at the mere recollection of the wording of the will. »He must have been mad; he must have been coerced into dictating such incomprehensible maudlin folly. He would 'leave it to the good angel of his life to be the good

angel of his family, feeling sure that in all things she would carry out his wishes.' That was all the care he took of his brother and his brother's boy.«

»It *was* incomprehensible, maudlin folly,« Gilbert Denham said, thoughtfully. »Called that woman his good angel, did he? I wish we could find out some of the friends of the departed Vicary. Let us hope that good cheer and the relaxing influences of the season will induce her to give us a clue to-night.«

They went out soon after this, and when they were clear of the village they turned down the valley, and skirted the boundary wall of Larpington House. Occasionally they got glimpses of the fine, square, redbrick pile through the thick belts of forest trees; and at last Mr. Denham asked,

»Does the inside correspond with the exterior? There ought to be fine galleries and saloons in a house like that.«

»You'll hardly believe it, Gilbert, when I tell you that I only know the hall and a drawing-room. I have never been asked to go into the picture-gallery—nor into any of the other rooms, for that matter. But the picture-gallery, where there are portraits of Arthur's father and mother, and of his brother and himself when they were little boys—it's too bad, it's shameful I have never been in it.«

»My dear child, have you ever asked to go over the house? You're a daughter of it by marriage, as much as Mrs. Waldron is. You ought to have swallowed your pride and your aversion to the present possessor, and taken your children to see the race they have sprung from.«

»I couldn't do it, Gilbert; I couldn't go as a suppliant for the smallest favour to the house where I ought to be reigning now in right of my boy. Did you hear her just now, when he said he was 'Gerald Waldron of Larpington?'«

»Yes; and I heard you, too, you injudicious little woman. Your reply sounded like a threat. This village of yours is a lovely one. I don't wonder at your wanting to see your boy reigning in it.«

They had by this time climbed to the top of the highest point of land in the parish—a wooded hill, with a cleared space at the summit, that was known as the Wren's Nest. From this place of observation, they could see the whole of the village, and almost the whole of the fair manor of Larpington House. Then to the right of them was the deer-park, well stocked with dappled deer. Down immediately beneath them was the lake, alive with rare foreign birds and stately swans. On the slopes on the opposite side of the lake were the kitchen gardens, the hot-houses, and vineries; and beyond these again were the lawns, the pleasure-gardens, and the house.

»It was given by Edward the Fourth to a Waldron, and it may go to Miss Vicary, the child of nobody knows whom,« Horatia said presently, with one of those choking, dry sobs, that are the result of a collision between hope and despair.

»It may; there's no saying what may happen, Horry. Mrs. Waldron may marry again herself, and have a son, and leave it to him. Don't despair, though, little woman; and, above all, don't cut yourself off from such scanty intercourse as you

have already held with her, and don't startle her into extra reserve and prudence by any more rash speeches. Before anything can be done—if anything is ever to be done—we must learn a little of Mrs. Waldron's former life. We will introduce the subject of family likenesses and peculiarities to-night in the picture-gallery. She isn't a woman if she doesn't swear that there is some very marked and distinguishing trait in her own family.«

»You mean to get me into the picture-gallery, then, Gilbert?« his sister asked, laughing. »I declare I feel already as if we had made a step in the right direction. I shall feel so strong when all the Waldrons are looking down upon me—for I am the mother of the sole remaining Waldron of Larpington.«

Meanwhile the young widow and her stranger guest had been the subject of much conversation in the village. It had been satisfactorily ascertained, some halfhour after his arrival, that he was Mrs. Arthur's brother. And »a fine out-spoken gentleman: one who wasn't afraid to take out his purse,« he was pronounced to be. But Larpington society sighed to know something more about him, and about the way he had made the money which filled that purse. It was only natural and proper that it should do so, for had not one of »our own young gentlemen« (as the dead brothers were still called here in the cradle of their race) »married his sister?«

Accordingly, this afternoon, as soon as Mrs. Arthur Waldron and Mr. Denham were well away from the Bridge House, her household received visitors. One of the first who presented themselves

in the kitchen, and engaged the cook in cheerful converse, was Miss Vicary's maid.

The two young women had been born and brought up in the village, were old schoolfellows, and at odd times bosom friends. There were periods when envy, hatred, and malice intervened and separated them. This trio had been reigning in Margaret, the Bridge House servant's mind for some time, in consequence of her old friend Rhoda having got the situation of own maid to the young lady at The House. For Miss Vicary gave high wages, and the perquisites of her special retainer were many.

But this day Margaret, having something to tell, yearned for some one to tell it to; and so the welcome her successful friend met with was a warm one. They spoke for a while of the gay doings at The House, and then, somewhat triumphantly, Margaret trotted out her one ewe lamb.

»We have company, too,« she said. »Missus's brother, a gentleman of great fortune. Nurse heard missus telling Master Gerald the other night, that it would be the making of him if his Uncle Gilbert took a fancy to him.«

»Law!« Rhoda ejaculated, and then they went on to discuss the wonderfulness of it all. That Mrs. Arthur should go on living in such a quiet, »mean« kind of way, they called it, when her brother was a man rich enough to be the making of Master Gerald! »He's made it by conjuring, from what I make out,« Margaret added; and then they agreed that they could make nothing of it.

But Miss Vicary made something out of it when

her maid, in the course of dressing her mistress's hair for dinner that night, mentioned this among other »little bits of news she had heard while out walking.« It impressed her evidently, for the fine Napoleonic face grew even more thoughtful and determined than it was wont to be.

When she was dressed, she went to her mother's room, and opened the subject at once.

»Mother, the first good-natured thing we have done to Mrs. Arthur Waldron is a foolish one. This man, her brother, is a rich lawyer.«

»What of that?« Mrs. Waldron answered, moving her hands restlessly about the toilet table litter.

»I would rather have heard he had been anything else. They have the habit of prying, whether they fancy there's anything to pry into or not.«

»He's welcome to pry all over the house, and into the will, too, if he likes. Not all the lawyers in England can upset it. Why, Melly, you're not going to faint at shadows?«

The younger woman shook her head. It was a gesture of impatience at the idea propounded, but, like all Miss Vicary's movements, it was slow, and in a manner dignified.

»I'm sorry he is a lawyer, because I liked what I saw of him yesterday, and I don't want to like a lawyer,« she said.

Her mother laughed with merry, vulgar significance.

Lawyer or no lawyer, you must make yourself pleasant to him to-night, or else his sister will think we got them here to slight them, and I am sure I had no thought but kindness towards them.

Come, my dear, our friends will be down before us. Never mind the lawyer; he may be a married man.«

But it gave no pleasure to handsome, placid Melly Vicary to think that this stranger—this good-looking, *debonnaire*, clever man, who seemed to have brought a rush of fresh, living air with him into the place from the outside world—it gave her no pleasure to think that he might be married.

Verily he had done well in leaving his wife behind him. The thought that he had done so flashed across his mind as they were driving up to Larpington House that night.

»Just oblige me, and for your own sake say nothing of Bessie,« he exclaimed, suddenly. »No one here knows anything about us, I suppose?«

»People here don't even know you're married,« she answered. »I have made no confidences concerning myself or any one connected with me.«

Her brother said, encouragingly,

»There's nothing got by making confidences. One either interests people too little or too much.«

Then the fly stopped, and they went into Larpington House.

CHAPTER III.

» ALAS! THEY HAD BEEN FRIENDS IN YOUTH.«

The change from the fusty fly with its discoloured lining and disorganized springs, its draughts, its damp, and its one slow depressed horse, to the light, the warmth, the freshness, the intense vitality of that interior into which they came in a moment, would have been direfully distressing to a woman of Horatia's temperament if she had not remembered that »all this might be Gerald's.«

It was the first time that the widow of the youngest son of it had seen Larpington House by artificial light. And being an impressionable woman, with an artistic eye, she was vividly impressed with the deep magnificent effects of light and shade that were given by space and splendour. Armour, in the abstract, was not a thing in which she took the faintest interest. But when she looked round on the suits that were hung up here, and remembered that they had been worn by little Gerald's ancestors, she thrilled with an intensity of emotion that made her glow into absolute beauty.

Undoubtedly they were a distinguished-looking pair that brother and sister, and more than one

of the many guests assembled in the great drawing-room thought so, as they came into the room.

Mrs. Waldron had hoisted her banner very high, and had beaten her drum very loudly this Christmas-tide, and the result of her exertions was a great gathering at Larpington House. As far as numbers went it was a grand success. But the minority »wondered« among themselves how the majority got there. The set who knew all about each other and themselves, and who fondly imagined that every one outside »the neighbourhood« even knew all about them also, found themselves suddenly confronted by another set who were not only in hopeless ignorance about the established »Orders« here but seemed to be in darkness as to established »Orders« of the like kind anywhere.

They were, too, this latter set, people with odd-sounding names of which *Debrett* was innocent. And a certain dimness and mistiness appeared to hang about the regions of their respective homes. And that these things were, was evident to the clear vision of Mr. Gilbert Denham before he had been in the room with them ten minutes.

»It is the first time that I have had the pleasure of seeing my old friends and my new ones under my roof,« Mrs. Waldron explained to him, with smiling assurance; and he could not help feeling, »Whatever she is, the woman isn't all bad. She doesn't cast off old friends.«

Suddenly, as he was thinking this, he became conscious that Miss Vicary was moving towards them; and in spite of the slow stateliness of her

movement and her outward tranquillity, he fathomed that she was troubled.

» Mr. Denham is not likely to be interested in which is which, mamma,« she said, colouring faintly. »For my part, I find the new just as dull as the old.« And then she looked at him again, and thought how far superior he was to any one else in the room.

He laughed, and glanced over the array of fat county ladies who were sitting about in a state of speechless calm, the result partly of their having nothing to say, and partly of their dread fear that they were compromising their position by dining with a miscellany that was so dubiously edited. From them his eyes wandered to their lords, who were finding social safety in discussing their own and their neighbours' property.

» Nothing to be got out of them,« was his mental verdict. »They don't like Mrs. Waldron, but they know nothing about her. There is *my* happy hunting ground.« And he unwarily suffered an expression of interest to come into his face as he turned it towards the »people she had collected from heaven knows where,« as her county neighbours expressed it.

Conspicuous among these former friends of Mrs. Waldron's was a scrupulously well-dressed man, whose manner was a pendulum between the almost melodramatically absorbed, and the sycophantically smiling. »Has been projected from behind a counter into drawing-room society with too sudden a jerk« was Gilbert's decision respecting this gentleman, »but I see he'll be glad to talk. My

friend! we'll know each other better over the walnuts and the wine. Those two sisters, too, they'll be glad when the onus is off them of being intensely interested in each others remarks; their time shall come on later.»

As his reflections reached this point Miss Vicary lightly touched his arm with her fan.

»Mamma has deputed you to take charge of me, Mr. Denham. I would be sorry for you if there happened to be any one who would amuse you better.«

The colour had deepened in her face, and her eyes were sparkling with no very soft light.

»How kind of Mrs. Waldron to fathom my wishes so exactly,« he said, in a low voice, as he offered her his arm, and they fell into the serpent-like line that was now undulating towards the dining-room. But pleasantly flattering as he made both words and manner, Miss Vicary palpably remained unpropitiated.

Now Gilbert Denham was a man who not only held that Cæsar's wife should be without suspicion, but he was one who would very strongly have advocated the whacking of Cæsar's wife, provided any one had suspected her. But on this occasion he was to a certain extent untrue to his principles. That is to say, though he unquestionably suspected Miss Vicary of something that would, if discovered not altogether redound to her credit, he was very far from desiring to hand her over to condign punishment.

Quite apart from the woman, he liked the woman's looks. There was this practical power about Gilbert Denham: he could separate mind and

matter. The former, in this case, was probably not absolutely stainless, but the latter was fair and fresh, and so he strove to propitiate her.

»You appeared to be taking a great interest in the Miss Iblets when I was obliged to interrupt your meditations,« she said, in what would have been a huffy tone, if »huff« could ever be expressed by a monotone, and with a catching laugh that would have been a giggle if it had not been delivered so slowly.

»The Miss Iblets! Ah, yes! the two young ladies who are opposite to us now,« he answered, looking suddenly at them as he spoke, in a way that was designed to make Miss Vicary believe—and that did make Miss Vicary believe—that he had not given a second thought to them. At the same time he was thinking, »What a queer stratum of society one has got into, where such names obtain;« »Old friends of yours, I suppose?« he went on.

»Hardly of mine. Mamma knew their parents, I believe, before papa died.«

»I thought, perhaps, you had all been at school together, and had vowed eternal friendship there.«

»No; we were not at school together.«

»By-the-way—I'm rather interested in the subject—what's your opinion of the relative value of school education at home and abroad for girls?«

»What do you mean?« she asked, uneasily.

»Which do you think is the best? You can't have left school very long, and I want an opinion from some one who has had recent practical experience.«

»I'm not competent to give an opinion,« she said, presently.

»A lady to whom I was talking on the subject the other day, rather prejudiced me against foreign schools, and my mother used to have an antipathy to English boarding-schools. I am vibrating between the two now? I want some one to say with decision, 'I can recommend So-and-so's school.' Now, can't you recommend a school that you were at? Can't you aid me in my difficulty?«

He was a clever man, and he was a wellbred man; but in this instance there was a want of tact in his earnestness, and a want of breeding in his importunity. In his anxiety he was overreaching himself; and the woman he was addressing was keen enough to take his weapons, and clever enough to turn them against himself.

»Doesn't it strike you that a recently-emancipated school-girl would be the last person in the world whose opinion was worth having on such a subject?«

She asked it lazily, sipping her soup as easily as if she had been accustomed to it all her life.

»Why?« he answered, turning his head slightly, and looking admiringly at the massive profile—the handsome profile of the powerful face that would not be lightly moved to commit itself by an abrupt expression of the truth.

»Why? How can you ask why? If the school were good, not one girl in a hundred would like it well enough to give it a kind word.«

»I think you're the girl in a hundred who would do it,« he said, irrepressibly. »Come, tell me. Where was your educational pasture?«

»Can't you understand that a girl may be brought up—educated in a way—without ever going to school? That was my case,« she said, deprecatingly; and once more he felt that she had unconsciously baulked him.

»But I should like this child in whom I am interested to be educated in your way, Miss Vicary,« he said, insinuatingly, »if the same conditions would produce the same results.«

He had got just so far in his speech when she stopped him.

»What a hard thing it is to know that all the civil things said to one are false,« she said, with a look of »ache« in her face that pained him, though he had a good, well defined object in making her ache. Then she went on—

»You wouldn't care—you know you wouldn't care—to see any girl you were really interested in like me.«

»Miss Vicary!« The safest thing to do, under the circumstances, was to throw a world of reproach into his tone. Accordingly, Gilbert Denham threw it.

By way of reply, Miss Vicary remarked, »How well your sister looks to-night!« And the remark caused Gilbert to look at Horatia.

The young widow of Larpington was at her best to-night. It was all so peaceful, so smooth, so well-oiled; and yet intuition taught her that she was in the fray, and the feeling taught her to sparkle in her own essentially feminine way. She was the fairest woman in the room. The people who were meeting her for the first time were un-

animous in thinking how much better the widow of the younger Waldron would have played the part of Queen Regent at Larpington than did the widow of the elder brother.

But for all her charm and fascination and beauty—for all his clear, keen perception of these things—for all his genuine and true brotherly affection for her—Gilbert Denham had a momentary pang of regret as he looked at her, that her interests should be utterly and entirely opposed to those of the woman by his side.

For in pursuing Horatia's interests he knew that he should press on straight to his object, overturning, unravelling, investigating. And he was almost sorry, as he felt it was possible that such a course might end in the overthrow and degradation of Miss Vicary.

»It's a game of chess,« he thought; »and I shall move those pawns, the Miss Iblets, first, though Miss Vicary is no doubt inwardly resolved that I shall not get near them.« Then he dismissed the subject from his manner, though not from his mind, and soothed some vague alarms that were beginning to fill Miss Vicary's breast, by saying,

»Yes; my sister is looking very well. I wonder she hasn't married again; don't you?«

»I have never wondered about it before, but I do, now you speak of it. She's more than pretty, and so young-looking.«

»It was a very happy marriage, poor Horry's, so long as it lasted.« Gilbert went on, thoughtfully. »Did you ever see my brother-in-law?«

She shook her head in the negative, and again

the colour mounted and spread slowly over her face.

»Mr. Arthur Waldron died before — my stepfather; consequently before we came back to England. Didn't you know that?« she answered, in a measured, cautious tone, that made him involuntarily regard her steadily again.

»I may have heard of the circumstance, but I have forgotten it,« he said, in reply. »I have been out of the country myself for a long time, ever since my poor sister's wedding-day; and I haven't been well posted up in family details. By the way, George Waldron died abroad, you say? Where?

A sullen look, almost of defiance, succeeded the one of embarrassment on Miss Vicary's handsome face.

»You'll be asking me the date, and the hour, and the circumstances next,« she replied, making an effort to speak lightly. »Why choose such a gloomy topic? One that you may well think is a sad one for me. We never even talk of it among ourselves. Mamma has a sensitive horror of hearing her sad loss mentioned.«

»Sad loss, indeed!« he answered, smiling. »Your mamma is too sensible a woman, I am sure, to go on bemoaning the loss of a young fellow who might have been her son. Was George Waldron as handsome a fellow as his brother Arthur?«

»Quite. Handsomer, I should think, judging from their portraits.« She spoke eagerly, in her infinite relief at his quitting the subject of where George Waldron died. »Mr. Waldron was such a handsome, dashing, splendid young man, that

people used to wait about at the hotels on the chance of seeing him pass.»

She spoke with more enthusiasm than she had yet displayed, and Gilbert thought, exultantly, »His name is the 'open sesame' to the door of her reserve. Whatever her mother's sentiments concerning him may have been, I have no doubt about the daughter's.»

Aloud he said,
»Your report of him makes me wish to see his portrait. I thought poor Arthur a splendid young fellow. Let us go and compare them by-and-bye. Shall we?»

And Miss Vicary answered »Yes« at once, and so he gained his point about effecting an entrance into the picture-gallery.

The pawns that he meant to move without delay were not at all convenient to his hand, when with the earliest detachment of men who followed the ladies he went into the drawing room. The Miss Iblets were sitting together again on a sofa, in front of which a long table, covered with photographs and annuals, was placed. For a moment he thought,
»My time has come. I'll go and talk Christmas literature to them.« But even as he thought it he perceived that Miss Vicary's fine person barred the only passage between heavy furniture that led to their retreat.

With an easy reflection that, »though the time hadn't come yet, it should come soon,« he turned away, and surveyed some of his other pieces. His sister was his queen; she must be moved into another square without delay. He crossed the room

to where she was sitting silently, disdainfully watching and listening to the exuberant mirth where-with Mrs. Waldron was seeking to amuse her friends.

»It's not a bad game, Horry; why don't you join it?« he asked.

»My dear Gilbert, I'm too old to play at forfeits with any one but my own children,« she answered, a little impatiently.

Then she made room for him by her side, and went on in a low voice, »And in devising what the acts of redemption shall be, how the innate vulgarity of that woman comes out! How different George Waldron must have been to my poor boy, to have chosen such a woman for his wife!«

»Don't sit with your thoughts painted on your face, please, dear; you must fall in with these people's ways and humours for little Gerald's sake.«

»I shall not further his interests by playing at forfeits,« she laughed; »but anything else. Oh, look! that man who is so uncomfortable in his dress clothes is coming to me.«

»Talk your best to him; he knows something that I want to find out,« Gilbert Denham muttered, as the gentleman, who vibrated between melo-dramatic reserve and sycophantish smiling, approached the young widow—and then, as soon as he saw that his sister meant to attend to his directions, he went back to Miss Vicary, who had been watching him with a sort of unwilling interest the whole time.

»May I see the portraits now?« he asked. »You are not in their game. Will you mind coming and showing them to me?«

She rose up at once, with a certain pleased promptitude that made him clearly understand that both her task and her companion were congenial to her.

»I shall be very glad. Mamma, Mr. Denham and I are going to take a turn in the picture-gallery,« she whispered as she passed her mother; and at the same time Gilbert slightly shook his head at his sister, who was watching him eagerly, in a way that told her he was not ready for her yet.

Miss Vicary led the way out of the dining-room, through an anteroom and the grand old hall, and then up the stairs to the wide, lofty corridor, where all the Waldrons of Larpington were hanging in imposing array.

»Shall we begin at the beginning?« Miss Vicary asked.

He had offered her his arm as they ascended the stairs, and she rather liked the idea of a prolonged *tête-à-tête* stroll with him. Physical beauty appealed powerfully to Miss Vicary's senses, and she had seen none of so fine a type, she thought, since George Waldron died, as that of this man who seemed so well inclined to devote himself to her.

»Let us look at the two brothers in whom we are both interested first,« he said, softly. »After that we'll go religiously through the whole race.«

»Here they are as little boys,« she said, crossing the gallery, and pausing before two life-size portraits of a brace of sunny-haired boys. »And the golden-haired woman who stands next to them was their mother.«

»She must have been a rare beauty!« Gilbert exclaimed, abruptly.

»Yes« Miss Vicary answered, glowing into animation again at once; »and she gave her rare beauty to her eldest son.«

»They are both pretty little fellows,« Gilbert said, turning to the boys. »The little chap with his arms round the dog's neck is exactly like my sister's boy. They're fine little men.«

»You can see,« Miss Vicary went on expatiating, »that even in their childhood George was the handsomest of the two. You see they both have light hair, but George's is real, rich gold. Arthur's turned brown, I know. And George's eyes are those long, lovely violet ones that are so much more beautiful than any other colour; Arthur's are just merely moderately good gray ones. Now come and look at them as men.«

She stepped on almost rapidly for her, and he followed her, until they came to a full-length of the late master of Larpington.

»This is Mr. Waldron,« she said, in a low voice: and Gilbert Denham, looking up, was taken by surprise, even though she had said so much about it, by the forcible representation before him of the very highest type of manly beauty and cultivation.

He was depicted as a man of good height, and slight, strongly-built, clean-limbed frame—a lithe, active-looking man, with a bold, bright, beautiful face that looked out warmly and cordially upon one from the canvas. The golden, floating curls of his boyhood were gone, but the short, wavy, crisp locks were of shadowless gold still; and every

line of the fair, handsome face expressed culture and refinement.

»And that fellow, who might have been the model for the Apollo Belvidere, married that old woman—and didn't do it for money!« Gilbert Denham thought, with strong disgust. »Why on earth didn't he take the daughter if the onus was on him of marrying one of them? Poor fellow! he must have been in some awful scrape to have taken such desperate measures to get out of it.«

As these thoughts passed through his mind, Miss Vicary stood silent, absorbed, gazing up at the magnificent reproduction of a magnificent original, as a devotee might gaze at a shrine containing the holiest relic. Turning his head towards her abruptly, Gilbert Denham caught the expression of her face, and deepened it for an instant by saying,

»A splendid young fellow, truly! A thousand pities that he died so young, and that he missed the best in life! He ought, according to the fitness of things, to have married some lovely young girl, ought he not?«

He said it out absolutely without design. If Miss Vicary were the sensible girl he half believed her to be, she would thoroughly appreciate the truth of the fact he had stated. Her mother might be a very good mother and a very decent woman; but she was not the right wife for that glorious-looking young fellow, and Miss Vicary must know it.

»Now we will have a look at Arthur,« he went on rapidly, without apparently noticing the hardly

suppressed storm of emotion that was raging in the girl's breast, rendering her speechless. »There he is, dear old boy, with his jolly, free, kind smile; but you're right, he was not the Adonis that his brother was. Shall we go back and bring——«

»I would rather not go back for a few minutes,« she panted out, sitting on one of the sofas that were ranged along the gallery. »I don't know what it is; but looking at the portraits of people I have known, after they're dead, often makes me ill, they look so pleading.«

»And reproachful often, don't they?« he added. »I shouldn't care to face that picture if I had wronged the original in any way, I must say. Will you allow me to go and fetch my sister? I dare say she would like to see how the Waldrons have been in the habit of looking for generations. May I leave you here?«

»Yes, do,« she answered, quickly, relieved by the idea of getting rid of her observant companion for a few minutes. »Bring your sister. How impolite of me not to have thought of her before! Go and bring her.«

As this was precisely what he had intended to do, Gilbert executed her behest with alacrity. »Come, Horry,« he said aloud, entering the drawing-room, »Miss Vicary has sent for you to come and see the family portraits. Will you come, too?« he added, addressing the Miss Iblets; and they rose up gladly, and came out from their solitary fastness, and followed, with Mrs. Arthur Waldron, along the way it pleased this dominating spirit to lead them.

Miss Vicary was her massively-composed self again by the time they reached the picture-gallery. All traces of the unwonted emotion she had displayed were banished from her face and manner, and there was about her an air of sullen stagnation that was not prepossessing. She rose from the sofa as they approached her, and addressed the Iblets rather crossly.

»Haven't you seen enough of the family fogies? I should have thought you would have found forfeits more amusing.«

»Oh, but Mr. Denham asked us to come,« they answered.

It was so strange to them to be asked to do anything by a man of Gilbert's order, that it made them almost disregard Miss Vicary's disapprobation of their conduct. And then, in the easiest, most *debonnaire* way in the world, Gilbert said,

»Will you point out the pictures that will most interest her to my sister, Miss Vicary? I will introduce your friends to the Waldron family from the commencement. It will be quite a study of costume, and we shall have to rake up our history a little, in order to remember 'who reigned' when these were in the flesh.«

And then, with jealous, anxious eyes, Miss Vicary watched him walk to the other end of the gallery with the »friends of her youth,« from whom she had steadfastly resolved to keep him apart.

»What will he find out, I wonder?« she thought. And something seemed to whisper to her that he would find out whatever he desired.

CHAPTER IV.

»WE ALL HAVE OUR SKELETON CLOSET,
I SUPPOSE.«

A STRANGE sensation possessed Mrs. Arthur Waldron when at last she found herself in the heart of the house, in the midst of those Waldrons of whom her son—her own boy—was the sole remaining male representative. She had often conjured up in imagination the scene which she now saw set before her, and the emotions that would beset her when she found herself looking for the first time at the portraits of her husband, and of those who had been nearest and dearest to him. But not one of these emotions beset her, now that the circumstances she had imagined had actually come to pass. The one prevailing thrilling sensation was that she was nearing a discovery—that there, with the race looking down upon them, some clue would be given to her which would either smash the present possessors of Larpington or substantiate their claim to it.

Fraught with this feeling she stood quite still and silent before the portraits of the two brothers—still, save that she trembled a little, and the trembling touched a chord of womanly feeling in Miss Vicary's breast.

»It is trying to look at such life-like portraits when the owners are dead,« she said, feelingly; »I don't wonder at this upsetting you, if it's as like your husband as the other is like Mr. Waldron.«

Horatia recovered herself, shook off the bonds of excited silence, and spoke,

»It's a vivid recollection-awakening likeness of my dear Athur, and I like it the better for that; and this is George? Indeed, he must have been what Arthur always called him, a magnificent fellow.«

»And he died!« Miss Vicary replied, in bitter commentary. »And he died! It's only those whose death would be a boon to themselves and others who live on through everything.«

»You're young to take that morbid view,« Horatia said, gently. But though she spoke gently her feelings partook more of the nature of repulsion than of pity for the girl. »How can she have the bad taste to speak so warmly of my brother-in-law, when she must know that I think he disgraced himself by marrying her mother,« she thought indignantly. And so, though her gentleness of manner and utterance remained unchanged, both were cool—cooler than they had ever been before to Miss Vicary—as she said,

»Shall we follow the others? My brother seems to be amusing them well.«

For the last two or three minutes Miss Vicary, absorbed in her contemplation of the gallant, graceful beauty of the late master of Larpington, had forgotten to keep a watch on the proceedings of the trio whose temporary union was so an-

tagonistic to her desires. But now she hurried after them, and as she came up she heard one of the sisters say,

»We oughtn't to make so much noise down at this end; we may disturb the invalid,« and as she said it she pointed to a wide door that was close to her side.

»I didn't know that there was an invalid in the house,« Gilbert Denham said, with ready courtesy dropping his voice as he spoke. And then Miss Vicary hurriedly and in some confusion put in,

»Yes, her case is a sad one. I ought to have cautioned you not to talk loud; her nerves are affected by the least noise.«

Through the gallery, as they were gathered together talking in this way, came Mrs. Waldron and several of her guests, and in a moment she understood the subject of their conversation.

»A sad case indeed, as Melly says,« she exclaimed, pathetically. Then she lowered her voice, and asked Gilbert,

»Have they told you who she is?«

He shook his head in the negative.

»My eldest daughter, and she is mentally ill; we all have our skeleton closet, I suppose, Mrs. Arthur,« she continued, turning to the young widow, who was listening with both eyes and heart full of pity now. »Our affliction is a heavy one indeed; we ought not to have saddened our friends by referring to it to-night, Melly, dear.«

Then they all turned with rather lowered spirits and went back to the drawing-room. And as they went back the man, who has been mentioned as

spasmodically melo-dramatic in style, took an opportunity of whispering to Gilbert,

»Miss Melly is a fine girl, as fine a girl as a man can desire to see, but the eldest girl was as pretty a creature when they took her abroad for her health as I ever saw in my life; it's a sad case indeed.«

»Is she much altered?« Gilbert asked, sympathetically.

»Terribly; merely a faint trace of good looks left now; naturally they don't like the poor changed child to be seen by those who knew her in her bloom. With all her good fortune Mrs. Waldron has her heavy cross to bear.«

»She has indeed,« Gilbert responded, heartily. And somehow or other he felt sorry that he had vowed to find out all he could about the Larpington House people, since what he had found out was so very sad.

»Your brother-in-law must have had a bee in his bonnet,« Gilbert remarked to his sister as they drove home that night; »nothing but lunacy can account for a young fellow, such as both his likeness and report represent him to have been, throwing himself away as he did. It is distracting to think of him as the husband of that woman, and infatuated by that woman.«

»Gilbert, I'm bewildered! Two or three times while we stood together in the picture-gallery there was absolute passion in the girl's face, as she looked at or spoke of George Waldron; before I saw this, I liked her better than I did her mother, believing her to be harmless; now I detest

her even more than I do Mrs. Waldron. 'Mrs. Waldron!' isn't it odious that she should bear that name?«

They were at home by this time, and he was handing her out of the fly and into the Bridge House as he answered.

»We don't seem very likely to find a flaw in her right to all the name endows her with, Horry. You were right in saying there was a mystery in the lives of those people, but you see we have proved that the mystery concerns themselves entirely—is one they were justified in shiedling from the vulgar gaze—and in no wise interferes with yours or Gerald's interests.«

»But they may have *another*, Gilbert,« she pleaded earnestly, »who knows but the discovered may aid us in elucidating the undiscovered one? Let us try to get sight of and speech with the mentally afflicted Miss Vicary; she may be more useful to us than the sister who is in possession of her senses.«

»What a small Machiavelli you're becoming,« he said, laughing.

»Because I feel as sure as that I'm a living woman that my boy is being wronged; I'd stoop very low indeed to conquer those who are defrauding him of his own; and through the labyrinth of scheming you must be my guide. What shall I do next?«

»Ask them to an evening party; show yourself willing to be on social terms with them; go there as often as you can, and be quite sure that I am not wronging Bessie if I seem to be forgetting the fact that I am a married man.«

The morning of the 26th dawned fair and mild as a morning in May. All trace of yesterday's frost had vanished, and the scarlet holly berries with their emerald green leaves looked almost incongruous in the sunshine. The brother and sister at the Bridge House breakfasted with their windows open, and a sudden increase of sunshine made Gilbert exclaim,

»It would be a shame to spend this morning in the house; do you ever ride in these days, Horry?«

»I have no horse.«

»Have you a habit?«

»Yes; but I'm out of practice; and, moreover, I don't believe there are any horses to be got in the place.«

»I'll see about that; I am now going to walk up to Larpington House to suggest that the younger members of the party join in our ride; does she ever ride, by-the-way?«

»Oh! yes; in a massive, pompous kind of way, with a man out of livery behind her.«

»We will dispense to-day with the pomp, and the man in plain clothes, the massiveness must be put up with; leave Miss Vicary to me, and after a few days I will undertake to know more than she has the least intention of telling me at present of the Vicary family history.«

He did it so easily and unconstrainedly that it seemed to them a natural thing that the handsome, amusing young man whom they had only known one short day, should saunter up and call on Mrs. Waldron and Miss Vicary at an early and

unconventional hour. He excused his want of ceremonious observance by explaining that it was altogether in the plain path of duty to do whatever offered to be done in a place where there was so little going on.

»I have induced my sister to go for a ride with me, and I have come up to try and persuade you to join us, Miss Vicary—you and such of your friends as have nothing better to do.«

»Where have you got horses from?« Miss Vicary asked, bluntly. But inwardly she was pleased at the prospect of such an escort as Gilbert Denham. Her circle of new acquaintances was a very small one; and the majority of those whom she knew in the neighbourhood were heads of houses, husbands and fathers, who had left the days of their youth, and all taste for gay fooling far behind them. This young man's society was a pleasant change to her, »however it ended,« as she observed to herself.

»When I have received your promise to join us, I shall go in search of horses for my sister and myself; but I want your promise first to give a zest to the search,« he answered her, in a lowered tone, and with that sort of beseeching air that the best of men will assume at times to anything but the best of women.

»The Larpington House stables are too well stocked to make any search necessary,« Mrs. Waldron put in graciously. »My dear Melly, go, and don't make any more ado about it. Mr. Denham, will you be kind enough to go round to the stables and choose horses for your sister and yourself?«

And so it was settled, not exactly against Melly's will, but hardly with her hearty and entire concurrence. Nor can it be declared that Gilbert carried his set purpose through by the force of his unassisted moral sway and power of acting as he pleased. It was Circumstance that befriended him in this matter. It was the easy habit of doing the easy thing that comes to our hand to be done that led Mrs. Waldron to further his intimacy with her daughter, and that led her daughter to fall into the scheme, though she doubted the wisdom of it—doubted vaguely, be it understood. If Miss Vicary could have defined her fears, she would have taken care that they should never be relised.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW ALLY.

MELLY had no sooner suffered herself to be whirled into the vortex of her mother's gracious permission that every one who willed it should ride away forthwith, than she remembered the Iblets, and resolved that they, at least, should not benefit by equestrian exercise this morning. »They're perfect sieves,« she said to Mrs. Waldron, when that lady said, in an excess of indulgent feeling,

»Why shouldn't the poor things go if they can sit upon a horse? They haven't had the luck to have the many pleasures you have, Melly.«

»They're perfect sieves, mother; Mr. Denham is clever enough to lead them to say anything he likes.«

»Well, my dear, they know nothing that could go against us in any way; when they knew us we were 'poor but honest,'« and Mrs. Waldron laughed gaily as she made her quotation from the literature for the moral improvement of the people.

»All the same, if they go I won't,« Melly said, sullenly; »it sha'n't go on before my eyes, it's bad enough to have gone through it once; to hear them last night talking to him in their gushing awkward way, not a bit as ladies talk, was horrible,

What could he have thought of us when it was forced upon him what our former connection was? With all your worldly wisdom, mother, you're a child in some things still.»

It boots not to delay in the telling. The end of it was that the Miss Iblets remained at home, when Miss Vicary and a gentleman in attendance on her rode down to the Bridge House to join Mrs. Arthur Waldron and Mr. Denham.

This cavalier is a new figure—an altogether fresh and altogether important figure on the canvas whereon these people and their fortunes are portrayed.

He was making his first call on the lady of Larpington House, when Melly came into the room to say that she was about to start for the ride, and he had already made his explanation as to why he had not called before.

It was brief and entirely satisfactory. The owner of the finest property next to Larpington in the neighbourhood he (Mr. Stapylton) had been absent from it for the last seven or eight years. He had gone away a gay, dashing, gallant-looking young fellow of two or three and twenty. And now he had come back a good typical well-bred Englishman of thirty, after having seen a good deal of the Old World and the New.

To say that Frank Stapylton resembled George Waldron in personal appearance would be untrue. Nevertheless, there was about him a certain look, a certain trick of bearing and expression, a certain thoroughbred ease and swing of manner that reminded both these women who saw him

for the first time of the dead Master of Larpington.

Analyse him, and not a single point of resemblance in feature or colouring to the dead man who had been such an Adonis, could have been discovered. Frank Stapylton's hair and eyes might have been any colour so far as the majority were concerned, while the man or woman must have been obtuse indeed, and afflicted with the most virulent form of colour-blindedness, who could fail to perceive that George Waldron's hair was of brightest gold, and his eyes of that real violet velvet hue, for whose love-looks many a woman has thought the world well lost. Yet, for all these marked differences, they did resemble one another in a variety of ways, in outline, in manner, in beauty, in expression, in a certain habit of being two of the chief men in that county-side.

It fell upon Mrs. Arthur Waldron's ears with a sound as if she had heard it before, that statement he made as to his having been the most intimate friend of George and Arthur Waldron, when they were all lads together. »George was my senior by half-a-dozen years,« he explained, »but Arthur and I were just the same age; how much I should like to see his widow.«

And then it was made clear to him that Mrs. Arthur Waldron, the widow of the younger brother, was living in Larpington village. And by sheer force of circumstances, without any wish on their part that it should be so, it was arranged that Mr. Stapylton should ride down to the Bridge House with Miss Vicary, and be introduced to the young widow.

It was like a sudden relapse into the old life to Horatia to see this man, with his vague, indefinite likeness to her dead husband and his brother bowing before her. His manner, his words of hearty refined pleasure at having realised his desire of being introduced to her, stirred her heart and gratified her taste. Miss Vicary was not the medium through whom she would have desired to gain knowledge of any new people. But on this occasion Horatia freely forgave Miss Vicary. The knowledge gained was so very pleasant.

He joined the riding party, and it came about so naturally that he fell behind with her. They had so many interests in common; he could tell her so many incidents of their boyhood and very young manhood. »For we were more like brothers than mere friends,« he observed. And when he had said that he looked into her face for a moment, and felt he could trust her, and added, »It nearly knocked me down this morning when I saw the woman George married. You must understand what I felt; you must be disgusted.«

»Not only disgusted, but nearly distraught about it,« she replied with eager confidence, »puzzled, worried, driven wild with the craving I have to find out the why and wherefore of it all. Was George Waldron mad when he wrote of that woman as the 'good angel of his life?'«

And then she went on to tell of the extraordinary will and all its injustice, of her suspicions, of her dislike to and her general animosity against these current rulers at Larpington House—went

on to tell all these things freely and frankly, as if she had known him for years; and at last, in the most natural manner in the world, found herself asking him to conjecture as to the causes which could have brought about George Waldron's marriage.

»It is altogether unaccountable,« he said, earnestly.

»When I saw Mrs. Waldron to-day my first feeling was that she was masquerading in jest; my next, that George Waldron's mind must have been affected when he described his bride to me in a rhapsody of love and admiration.«

»After his marriage. You saw him after his marriage?« she interrupted.

»Yes; we met in Paris accidentally. He had left Mrs. Waldron at Marseilles. He was planning a tour in the East then, and wanted me to join them. His wife was full of poetical fervour for the Morning Land, he told me.«

»How could he bring himself to utter such false folly about a woman like that?« Horatia asked, indignantly. »Full of poetical fervour for the Morning Land! I doubt if she ever heard of it.« And then she went on to almost upbraid him for not having gone back to Marseilles with George Waldron, and pointed out to the latter the manifold imperfections of his wife.

»I don't think I could have carried my friendship to him to the extent of endorsing his statement as to his wife being 'one of the fair-faced angel women for whom men would gladly lay down their lives,'« he laughed out merrily.

»*Did* he say that? Do you wonder at my

being irritated when I hear of such senility, remembering, as I do always, that my boy suffers from it? George Waldron was my husband's brother, and my husband loved him dearly, but he must have been very mad or very bad to speak of that swarthy, repulsive-looking woman as a fair-faced angel.«

»The daughter is a fine girl,« he said, looking up stedfastly at the pair who were a-head of them. »Is a complication to arise, Mrs. Waldron? — Is your brother being lured by love into the enemy's camp?«

A scarlet flush spread over Horatia's face. It shocked the delicate purity of the young matron's mind that her brother—a married man—should be conducting himself in a way that did legitimately give rise to such a suspicion. At the same time she could not repudiate the idea utterly and scornfully as she desired to do, for had not Gilbert cautioned her, for Gerald's sake, »To keep the fact of there being a Mrs. Gilbert Denham in existence a secret.«

Still she could not suffer such an idea to obtain concerning her brother. So she looked at her new friend with wistful, pleading eyes, and feeling she could trust the man who had spent his boyhood with Arthur, she said, »All is fair in love and war, you know; and there must always be war between these usurpers and me.«

CHAPTER VI.

WAS IT A VICTORY?

MEANWHILE there was not such a thorough cordiality, not such an utter want of constraint between the pair who were riding on in front. In some way or other Miss Vicary had picked up some of the rudiments of the art of riding, of which she had been entirely ignorant before her first appearance on the Larpington scene. But she was far from being either an easy or a graceful rider. She looked firm in her saddle, but not fascinating. As he regarded her this day riding steadily along by his side Gilbert Denham was not swayed by the same sort of feelings that upset Lancelot on the occasion of his first fatal ride with the fair Queen Guinevere.

It would have been a very easy task for the woman-pleaser to win Miss Vicary into a state of complete forgetfulness of his belonging to the adverse faction, if he had been so minded. But her appearance on horseback was not attractive enough to urge him on to the task. He admired her more, and showed that he admired her, when she moved about a room or stalked along a road like a feminine tower of strength. And Miss Vicary was quick to feel the slight chill which had fallen across the warmer current of his manner

of the last night. Quick to feel and prompt to reciprocate.

A sullen gloom settled upon and clouded over her for about half a mile. She grew more and more taciturn, and at last, with an ill-bred woman's want of power of concealment, she displayed her annoyance openly.

»We seem to me to be having a very dull ride,« she pouted; »it's always the way if people start off at an unusual time meaning to be unusually happy; we shall be home again about the time we ought to have been coming out if we had been sensible.«

»But I hope you're not contemplating anything so cruel as curtailing the ride,« he said suavely, with sudden remembrance of all the evil that might be done by anything like an expression of indifference to her; »I am looking forward to making it a model of a winter's day idyll. A day's ride through such dales and over the crests of such hills as these is a romance indeed.«

»Didn't somebody write a book with some such title?« she asked quickly—»some one who was consul somewhere abroad where we were?«

»Yes, Lever. His title was 'A Day's Ride, a Life's Romance,' and it was a misnomer; but many a life's romance is commenced in the course of a day's ride.«

A commonplace bit of sentiment—worthless, though true enough—a mere platitude, meaningless and idle and vague; but still fraught with feeling and meaning, with delicious possibilities and eloquence to the woman who listened to it. Gilbert

Denham's brow burnt with shame as he realized how firmly she believed in the folly he only implied, and in order that he might not be conscience-smitten to retrace his path he hurried along it the faster—with more apparent ardour.

»The romance commenced for me last night,« he began in a low tone. »A few hours before I should not have conceived it possible to feel the affliction of strangers so keenly as I felt for you last night in the picture-gallery.«

The colour spread in a flame over her face, even her throat reddened in a way that told him she must be suffering some smarting pain in her heart for the blood to be forced up with such violence into her usually pale face. After the lapse of a moment or two she answered him with trembling lips—

»Her mental affliction was brought on by illness—by unhappiness, Mr. Denham,« she explained, »it is not hereditary in our family; it's quite an isolated case.«

She spoke so earnestly and impressively that her meaning—the full meaning of the assurance she desired to convey to his mind—was patent to him.

»There must be a great satisfaction to your mother in that,« he said gently; »but to you the agony of seeing your young sister blighted by unhappiness, must have been very terrible; can you justify my interest in what concerns you, sufficiently to tell me her story?«

She shifted the reins uneasily from one hand to the other. She re-adjusted her habit. She fidgetted

with her horse's mane. But she *could not* defy nor disregard the influence this man was establishing over her, though she had a presentiment that harm would come of it.

»The man she was in love with died suddenly, and it turned her brain,« she said, speaking slowly and unwillingly, »that is all there is to tell; it's not a very uncommon story I believe, but we don't care to talk about it.«

»And you feel naturally that she is happier and better altogether at home with those who love her than she would be at an asylum? I understand how that may well be with loving tender women; still, speaking as a man who professionally has had to dabble in two or three cases of lunacy, I should prefer the chances of recovery that a residence in a well-attended asylum would give her.«

»Don't dabble in this case, don't Mr., Denham,« she exclaimed eagerly; »her case has been pronounced hopeless, and it would be stirring up sorrow to make any change now; why should you care about her at all?« she asked, relapsing into her womanly sullenness, »You've never seen her. You never will see her in all human probability.«

As soon as she said these words a resolve that he would see the skeleton of Larpington House framed itself in his mind. At any cost he would see her though a hundred mothers and massive sisters barred the doors of her prison. Aye, and this girl by his side should be his aid in the enterprise.

»Never see your sister!« he muttered. »You

have indeed failed to recognise the full meaning of my interest if you can say that.«

Again she was visibly affected, visibly swayed by his manner, visibly shaken in her stronghold by his partiality.

»If you came to see her solely on account of her being my sister, I hardly know—how can I know what to say? I have no sentiment about it,« she wound up with, abruptly setting her lips firmly, and retaining her veil of callousness which was her ordinary garb.

And then Gilbert Denham made a still bolder stroke and avowed that he »would wake it in her;« and the result of that bright winter day's ride was that Miss Vicary went home pledged to bring him into the presence of her unfortunate »sister Clarice.«

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For two or three days, during which intercourse was very frequent between the two houses, the subject of Clarice was not mooted. Miss Vicary hoped that it was forgotten, and abstained from saying a word to her mother about it, in weak reliance on that hope. And meantime she expanded into absolute warmth of feeling about Gilbert Denham, and generally gathered such Christmas roses as he caused to bloom about her path.

»She's actually getting fond of you; oh Gilbert!« his sister began, in a pleading, expostulating tone, one morning. Her conscience was terribly tender this special day, for all through the long hours of the night she had been haunted by a fell

spectral shadow of self-reproach about some new interests she was beginning to experience, and some new pleasures she was permitting herself not to taste, but to think about tasting. Therefore it was with tears in her voice that she said, »She's actually getting fond of you; oh, Gilbert!«

»And for your sake and your boy's it's necessary that she should get still fonder of me,« he answered, coolly. And then he told her a portion of the conversation he had held with Miss Vicary while they were out riding.

Like the majority of highly organised and intensely sensitive people, Horatia Waldron shrank from any communication with those unhappy ones who are bereft of reason. So it was with a shudder of mingled pity and repugnance, that she exclaimed—

»Why put yourself in the way of the mad Miss Vicary; isn't the sane one difficult enough and disagreeable enough, too, for that matter?«

»The mad one will suit my purpose better; I have a strong feeling that I shall come out of my interview with her with the end of the clue in my hand; and,« he continued, rising up, »I mean to have the interview this very day.«

»Supposing she should be dangerous, Gilbert,« she suggested anxiously. »The Vicarys are rather on an alarming scale; supposing she should fly at and hurt you?«

»I shall have a powerful protector in the person of her sister, the fair Melly,« he laughed out merrily. »Come, look up, little woman; your

prospects improve; I believe your days in the obscurity of the Bridge House are numbered.»

»How sanguine he is, and how bright and good,« she thought as he walked away alone at last. »Does the end justify the means, I wonder; I must say the means are very unpleasant—unpleasant to me and unworthy of Gilbert; but—«

But! she remembered little Gerald, and she could not help herself. Two mighty motives for being perfectly quiescent.

Gilbert Denham meanwhile would not, dared not, glance at, much less deliberately consider, the aspect and bearing of a single step that intervened between himself and his goal. He resolved upon reaching it. That was all. The »something« that there was to discover he determined upon discovering. What that something might be he had not the faintest suspicion—the faintest shadow of a suspicion. If he had been burdened, or blessed, with one he, too, might have fainted in spirit, and have faltered on his path to that inevitable end which a great writer has made a familiar friend to us in fiction.

But fate and circumstances favoured his design to-day. Whether these mighty allies did so to his ultimate entire satisfaction or not, must remain an open question.

As he went up the avenue to Larpington House, an avenue which somewhat resembled a cathedral aisle with its regular massive pillar-like elms, whose branches met in a grand lofty arch at a great height above, he met the daughter of the house, unaccompanied save by a plethoric pug.

It has been said that she looked well in out-of-door costume, when marching majestically over a good space of ground. And to-day she felt that she looked even better than usual, and the feeling put her at her best, as it does every woman.

Her hat became her, coming well down over her forehead, and just leaving the straight dark line of her well-defined brows visible beneath its velvet edge. There was a soft curly plume, a nice compact fluffy thing, flopping over the brim, which was borne out and well supported by the bright scarlet satin petticoat which she wore under a black velvet polonaise.

And again there was a something good and easy and suggestive of the fine well-drawn figure beneath it, in the cut of this polonaise. In a loose jacket, that did not indicate her lines, Miss Vicary would have resembled a milch cow rather than a modern Cleopatra. Her appearance to-day made his task easy and pleasant, and so he did not halt in his purpose of entering upon it.

That Miss Vicary was one of those dangerous creatures who are torpid and phlegmatic apparently until their weak point is touched, and who then wake up into a fulness and warmth of life, and a vigour of will that is apt to sweep away all before it like a devastating flood, was becoming evident to him. That he had touched that weak point—a subdued but passionate longing for love—was also evident. And that she would not only be revengeful, but would be revenged when she discovered that she had been be-fooled, was a certainty.

Nevertheless he went on unfalteringly, although he liked the woman he was going to hurt.

It is not a pleasant task this, of endeavouring to analyse the feelings of a man who was engaged on a piece of deliberate deception. Still it must be done, otherwise, in view of his conduct, all respect for his character would be lost. The former must appear to be bold, unscrupulous, pitiless. For Gilbert Denham regarded himself at this juncture simply as an unpaid detective, and deemed that in the endeavour to unravel crime he was justified, both by honour and by law, in false pretences that would otherwise have been loathsome to him.

She, too, had determined to bring things to an issue this day, but to a very different issue to that which he had in his mind. As has been said, Gilbert Denham was the first gentleman who had »ever made love to her.« The first »gentleman« be it observed! There was a mental reservation on her part when she made this statement to herself.

This being the case, and he having stirred such depths as there were in a heart that had never been thoroughly awakened, she with a certain coarse impatience that would not brook delay, resolved upon conducting herself towards him so as to leave him in no doubt as to the success of his suit. It was a portion of her creed—it is unfortunately a portion of the creed of many a woman who is better defended by breeding and education from falling a prey to such an error than was Miss Vicary—it was a portion of her creed that a woman may very well go more than

half way to meet a man who has moved one step towards her. The professors of this popular and rather debasing superstition rarely find that their reliance upon it is realised. Nevertheless it flourishes, this ungentle faith, and its followers adhere to and uphold it with a fervour that tells not of repeated failure.

On this occasion as soon as she met Gilbert Denham, Miss Vicary did not tell him that she had come out with her warpaint on expressly to meet him. But she showed him that she had done so in a way that would have made words weak as a means of flattery in comparison.

Her blush was beyond her control, perhaps, but her passionately penetrating glance, the tender way in which she inclined her head towards him, and the desperate tenacity with which she clung to the clasp of his hand as she stood speechless before him, all these were weapons that it would have been more womanly to have sheathed.

But she did not sheathe them. She waved them and caused them to flash, and strove with all her might (and she had power) to dazzle him by a display of them. And she succeeded in dazzling him apparently, for his eyes and voice and manner grew softer. It is given to few men to be virtuously discourteous when a woman reverses the order of things, and makes those advances which men ordinarily prefer reserving to themselves, as their own special privilege.

The long lingering pressure of her hand had not the power to thrill him much—handsomer women had pressed his hand before this day dawned

on him—but though it did not thrill him he returned it. A Sir Galahad would not have done this, but Gilbert Denham was not a Sir Galahad. He was a nineteenth century man of the world, bent on making a woman whom he admired and distrusted serve a purpose to the fulfilment of which he had pledged his legal skill and intellectual ability. From the moment he returned that hand-clasp she was in his toils. She might glide, slide, evade, spring with the subtlety and power of a panther. But he was enfolding her with the subtler force and strength of the boa-constrictor. But he admired the creature out of whom he meant to crush a secret, and so he would not hurt her more than was necessary.

»Did you come to meet me, did you?« he asked. And the way in which he asked it would have led a cleverer woman than Emmeline Vicary to believe that he hoped she had from the bottom of his heart.

»I was going for a walk, and I'm glad I didn't miss you,« she replied, with a certain bold shyness that characterises the concessions of some women.

»Don't go on to the road,« he pleaded, »the roads are hard and prosaic, and rather chilly, to tell the truth, to-day: let us go into the shelter of the woods; or are you not shod for the undergrowth?«

She held out a large, well-shaped, well-booted foot by way of answer, and taking the gesture for one of assent to his proposition, he led her from the avenue down a turfed path, and they were soon in seclusion under green trees.

This was all very well, and very promising as far as it went. But Gilbert Denham had no intention of spending the shining hours in pacing up and down a grassy alley, and raising hopes that were eventually to be defeated in Miss Vicary's breast. While she was wondering how long this state of ecstatic expectation would last, and in what way it would be brought to a termination by a definite offer of marriage, he was casting about for the surest means of getting himself conveyed without delay into the presence of her mentally afflicted sister Clarice.

»I should make this wood my reading-room in the summer if I lived here,« he said, as they came to a clearer space in which the trees assumed a larger and more forest-tree-like appearance.

»I think I prefer reading in the house in an arm chair when I read at all,« she replied. It was not at all in harmony with her feelings that the conversation should take a literary turn.

»Yes, the house and an arm chair for the perfect appreciation of some books, I allow. Anthony Trollope's novels for instance ought to be read under every condition of comfort that modern civilization enables us to surround ourselves with; but this is the spot I'd select to read Keats in or Tennyson; he must have been here when he wrote 'The Talking Oak.'«

»I don't know anything about Keats,« she answered, with a sulky conviction growing upon her that he was going out of her depth, where she would be unable to follow him, on purpose to get rid of her. »I don't know anything about

Keats, and as for Tennyson's 'May Queen,' I hate it. I hate everything that begins in joy, and ends in sorrow all in a minute.«

»But you don't hate the Idylls, you can't hate Idylls,« he went on hurriedly, seeing that she knew nothing about them. »It must have been in this very wood that Vivien fooled Merlin, as women have gone on fooling men from that day to this. Do you remember that verse where he says—

» 'My name, once mine, now thine, is doubly mine,
For fame, could fame be mine, that fame were thine,
And shame, could shame be thine, that shame were mine,
So trust me not at all, or all in all' ?«

»I didn't remember *that*,« Emmy answered, emphasising the last word in a way that was designed to make him believe that she did remember the rest of the poem.

»Poor old fellow, and she was humbugging him the whole time,« Gilbert laughed. »I find myself entering heartily into Merlin's feelings and sympathising with him more than I ever did before, now that I find myself in what I believe to be the very wood to which she followed him.«

»How fanciful you are, Mr. Denham,« she said discontentedly. »Why can't you be satisfied to take to-day in the wood as you find it, and leave fabulous Merlins and Vivians alone?«

»You are right: 'to-day in the wood' is fair enough for any man,« he said in a lower voice. Then he let silence reign for a few moments in order that the »lowered tone« might have ample time to take its due effect before he resumed,

» 'To-day' in the wood is sufficiently fair to

make me hope that there may be a to-morrow in the wood fore me.«

»Why doesn't he ask me to-day?« Emmy thought impatiently, as he paused again. Then he went on, »It is fair enough to beguile me into the folly of reminding a lady of her promises; you promised to let me know your poor sister Clarice. I shall not feel that you 'trust me all in all' until I do.«

It was a disappointing climax. The girl really thought a minute before that he was on the brink of asking her to be his wife. However, considering her lack of both blood and culture, she bore her disappointment bravely enough.

»I don't know what mamma will say,« she managed to utter; »but as far as I am concerned, you may see her this morning.«

They had turned, and were nearly out in the open avenue again, as she said this, and he came to a full stop before her, taking her hand very gently, almost caressingly,

»I have one more favour to ask. My sister lives very quietly, as you know, gives no parties, scarcely sees any society at all; now, in her name, I am to ask you to dine and spend this evening at the Bridge House; will you?«

Would she? What would she not have done for this man who was so rapidly gaining the empire over her?

»Yes, I will,« she said, with a pant. »It is kind of Mrs. Arthur to wish to see me so intimately.«

Then they walked back to Larpington House, and she led him straight through the picture gallery to the door of Clarice's room.

CHAPTER VII.

CLARICE.

GILBERT DENHAM almost pitied the ordinarily resolute girl for the wealth of irresolution and anxiety she displayed when at last she had brought him to the brink of his bourne.

»I think, after all, I had better go and call mamma?« she said, interrogatively. »Mamma quells her when no one else can; and the sight of a stranger may make her——«

»What? violent?« Gilbert suggested, as Emmy hesitated.

»No, not violent, but talkative,« she explained; »and as she never talks before mamma, I think I had better fetch her at once.«

»But I assure you even if she is garrulous I will show no aggravating signs of being startled or surprised,« Gilbert pleaded, watching Miss Vicary carefully the while, taking in critically each additional shade of sullenness as it flitted over her face, and being zealous in the taking of keen mental notes about the faltering purpose there was in the hand that clasped and fitfully released the door-bell.

»And you will come away the moment I tell you that your presence distresses her?«

»I will come away the instant my presence distresses her,« he answered, promptly.

»Come on, then,« she said quickly, ringing the bell sharply as she spoke, and the next moment the door was opened by the man whose manner had struck Gilbert as being alternately sycophantic and melodramatically pretentious on the night of his (Gilbert Denham's) first dining there.

»What, Emmy!« he ejaculated. And then he caught sight of Miss Vicary's companion, and retaining a firm grasp of the door he came a step outside, and looked from one to the other with a penetrating glance.

»Mr. Denham has got me to promise him an introduction to my sister Clarice, Mr. Carter,« Emmy explained, in reply to his mute interrogation.

»I thought you had more regard for her than to propose making her a spectacle,« the man addressed as »Mr. Carter« answered. I am sure Mr. Denham will take my word for it, as her—mental superintendent shall I call myself?—that the unfortunate young lady is happier when left undisturbed.«

There was something sly in the man's insinuating tones that irritated Gilbert Denham. »He is a slimy thing, and shall be made to crawl,« was the resolve of the latter. But slimy things have the knack of slipping out of one's grasp, unless handled judiciously. Gilbert Denham was not the man to suffer anything to slip out of his grasp by reason of injudicious handling.

He would not address the man—the subordinate who was manifestly merely one of the agents in this business, whatever it might turn out to be. He definitely addressed one of the principals without hesitation.

»Accident seems determined to intervene to prevent our becoming better acquainted, Miss Vicary,« he said, quietly. »It is not for me to oppose your wishes; let me thank you for having seemed to wish to gratify mine.«

It was his last card this, and he played it down boldly, as if he had been backed by all the honours of the same suit. It was his last card! And with it he won the trick.

»I didn't only seem, I really meant to gratify your wishes,« she exclaimed, with a gasp. »Mr. Carter, please to let us pass—this is my business; I take the responsibility of Mr. Denham's visit to my sister entirely on my own shoulders.«

The man she spoke to stood back as she desired him, and Gilbert Denham following her quickly before she had time to have a second thought as to what she was doing, or to change her mind, found himself in a small octagon ante-room, which was furnished neatly and prettily, and hung round with a set of spiritedly-executed water-colour drawings.

»The work of our poor young friend before her affliction,« Mr. Carter said, introducing the drawings with a wave of his hand to Gilbert Denham's notice.

Up to this moment Miss Vicary had been slightly in advance of the two men, but at this juncture she came back a step or two.

»Will you go first, Mr. Carter?« she said, »we'll follow.« And seing something that looked like faltering in her step as she said this, Gilbert Den-

ham offered her his arm, and compelled her to walk into Clarice's room by his side.

It all took place in a moment. Following closely on Mr. Carter's steps they passed beneath some curtains that were raised by a pulley, through a doorway, and into a lofty, well-lighted room that was occupied by two women.

One of these stood by a window, and she was in the act of drawing up a blind, and was looking round consulting some one as to the exact height to which it should be raised, and the exact amount of light which she should admit. She was a stoutly-built, kindly-faced, middle-aged woman; and she looked precisely what she was—a nurse. Gilbert Denham's eyes and understanding took her in at a glance. Then they both turned to the contemplation of the other woman.

She was sitting at a table with her back to them as they came on from the doorway. Her left elbow planted on the table, her left cheek resting on her clenched hand—and what a tiny white clenched hand it was, Gilbert Denham instantly noticed. Her figure was slender. »It ought to have been far plumper and rounder,« he thought, as he remarked the width of the well-modelled shoulders. A mass of soft-looking bright yellow hair was gathered up into a large roll at the back of her head. Her plain black silk dress hung in rich graceful folds about her. Around her altogether there was an air of refinement which startled him in Mrs. Waldron's daughter.

■ In the one moment of pausing on entering the room he saw and appreciated all these things. Then

that moment passed—he and his companions advanced into the room, and the lady at the table raised her head from her hand, turned round and looked at them.

An exclamation of unbounded mingled pity and admiration burst from his heart, and was only half-checked on his lips as he looked into this woman's face for the first time. He had anticipated seeing a certain amount of wrecked prettiness. But there was an expression in the dark soft violet eyes of the woman before him—a look of such unutterable despair in her white wasted but still more lovely face, that stirred him strangely.

There was not the faintest trace of confusion, violence, or excitement in her manner or countenance as she quietly regarded her visitors for a few moments. A look of repulsion, of loathing almost came into her eyes as they rested on her sister, but this was but for a second. Her gaze travelled on to Gilbert, and rested there.

And as it rested on him, he studied her with an intensity that made Emmeline Vicary quail.

Clarice had crossed her arms before her on the table over a drawing board on which she had been trying to trace the outlines of some vaguely remembered scene. It was a wistful, anxious face that was uplifted to their view. But he would never have discerned that she was mentally afflicted from the expression.

The dominating expression of both her person and manner was refinement. It pervaded her whole aspect with a subtle power that made him marvel at her being the sister of the woman by his side.

A sudden longing to hear her voice—to discover if its tones were harmonious with her appearance seized him.

»Won't you speak to your sister?« he whispered to Emmeline Vicary; »doesn't she know you?«

His tones, low as they were, caught the ear of the lady at the table. As Emmeline stiffly approached Clarice, the latter pushed her chair from the table slightly, and leaning back in it, and clasping her hands together with nervous uncertain force in her lap she said complainingly,

»Why have you come here, Emily, when I have not sent for you; and why do you come to me dressed in this absurd way? You know I have never approved of it; it is a style that does not become your station, and when young women dress out of their station mischief invariably comes of it. As some one used to say.«

Her manner was coherent enough, and her words were arranged in proper sequence. But a chill fell on Gilbert Denham's hopes as he listened to her. There was a want of purpose in her voice and her management of the same that belied the sanity he had fancied he had seen in her face. Somehow or other in spite of the strong appeal her lovely despairing face had made to his sympathies, these latter veered round to Miss Vicary as he saw how abashed and humiliated she seemed by her mad sister's rebuke.

»I am sorry that you are vexed to see me, Clarice.« Miss Vicary managed to utter these words presently, but she did so with such an obvious

effort that she invested their bald simplicity with a wealth of possible meaning.

»I protest against the familiarity,« the sister, who was bereft of reason, replied, rising from her chair as she spoke and quivering with angry emotion.

»I know that it's useless my doing it. I know that my protests fall on callous ears. I know I'm *mad* to value them; but——«

She hesitated, looked round at the man Emmeline had called Mr. Carter, and burst out crying in a forlorn hopeless way that was infinitely distressing to Gilbert Denham. Still for all the distress the sight occasioned him, he could not, he would not, tear himself away from the study of it.

»Her moods are variable,« Carter said, crossing over to Gilbert Denham. »I should strongly advise that you go away now.«

»Who is this man? Is he one of their people?« Clarice was addressing Carter now, and she palpably included all the race of Vicary when she asked if he was one of »their« people.

»He is a friend of mamma's,« Emmeline interposed, »and of mine, too, which is the reason he wished to know my sister,« she added, bluntly and defiantly.

More anger, a fuller emotion evidently swept over Clarice's soul and »possessed« it as it were. The sweet violet eyes dilated, flashed, and then grew dim behind the tears that rushed from them. In her pitiful powerlessness (how that powerlessness was expressed in every feature), she turned to the chair she had just left, and caught hold of its back for support as she shook out these words—

»Oh! my memory, my memory! Why can't I even remember how to prove that they lie? *My* sister wouldn't keep a cat shut up in this way; and you call *yourself* 'my sister.'«

»You see how unreasonable she is,« Emmeline muttered. »She's always like this—always giving herself absurd airs, and pretending all sorts of things; come away now; you haven't spoken to her even—what is the good of staying.«

»I will speak now,« he said, in the same tone, and then he advanced in an easy matter of fact way to the side of the poor shaken girl who was struggling painfully to suppress her sobs, and said,

»Will you allow me to look at your sketch?«

She turned large surprised eyes on him at once.

»Yes, you may look if you like; but it's from what I haven't got any longer, 'Memory,'« she replied, »it's meant to be a sketch of a lovely place I saw when every place on earth was lovely to me.«

»Ah! a bit of the Mediterranean coast?« he suggested, affecting to look critically at the sketch, where some shaky strokes represented the land line, and a splash of blue the waters of a severely circular bay.

»I don't know,« Clarice answered, drooping wearily down into her chair, leaning both elbows on the table, and making wedges of both hands for her face to rest upon, as she contemplated the work of art under discussion. »Where was it? Can you remember, Emily?« she continued, turning her head slightly with a natural air of command to her sister in the background.

Miss Vicary stepped forward, looked at the

sketch, lifted her eyes with an air of weary deprecation for Gilbert's benefit, and then replied that she »could not call the spot to mind at the moment.«

»Can you, *you?*« Clarice resumed, addressing Mr. Carter, impatiently, drumming on the table with the little hand that was again folded up tightly together the while. »Do make an effort!« she continued, a smile that would have been malicious if it had brightened a less fair face, beaming over hers suddenly, »do make an effort! I like to hear you bungle over foreign names.«

»Clarice is not amiable!« was Gilbert Denham's mental comment, »but she's a marvellous flower to have bloomed on such a family tree as the Vicarys«.

»Miss Clarice is about to have one of her most trying attacks, I fear,« Carter said, in an insolent kind of style, aside to Gilbert. »I should strongly recommend any one to depart who does not desire to see an unseemly exhibition.«

»Come, Mr. Denham,« Emmeline pleaded, and there were tears in her eyes as she spoke. Gilbert, after the manner of men when they like a woman, believed that these tears flowed from pity's pure fount, that they were in very truth crystal tributes of sympathy for her sister. It might possibly have occurred to a clear-visioned observer of her own sex that they were tears of mortification and annoyance at the expression of ardent admiration which had lived on Gilbert's face from the moment of his gaze first falling on the blonde beauty who

had lost what she called her Memory, and they affirmed to be her Reason.

»Come, Mr. Denham!« Emmeline repeated, with an impatient accent that Gilbert saw fit to disregard.

»Good morning,« he said very gently to Clarice, holding his hand out with an air of appeal as he spoke.

»Good-bye,« she answered, promptly giving him hers without hesitation.

»Must this be good-bye? may I not call on you again?«

»Call on me? nonsense! come, if they will let you in—which I doubt their doing, as you seem to like me,« she wound up, while sharply glancing suspiciously at her sister.

»Always unjust to me—always at her worst when I'm near her,« Emmeline pouted ominously. »Do come away, Mr. Denham, if you don't want to see a thunderbolt launched at my head; good-bye, Clarice.

»It's folly calling me by a name that was never mine, even if I have lost my memory,« Clarice replied, and there was again a degree of provocation that was almost insolent in her manner. Then, as at last her visitors turned to leave her, she resumed the attitude she had been in when they entered the room, and recommenced daubing brilliant colours over her drawing-board.

»A wreck, you see, a complete wreck,« Mr. Carter said, in a confidential tone, to Gilbert, as they walked the length of the picture-gallery together. It was far from the fair Emmeline's desire that the duet she had designed executing with Gilbert should

be turned into a trio in this way. But she had submitted quietly, though sullenly enough. For it was a received axiom with the mother and daughter whom he served, that »Carter always had a meaning and a motive« for everything he did.

»A wreck that may be re-built and refitted into as fair a form as it ever wore if proper means are taken,« Gilbert replied. »Your sister is a lovely creature, Miss Vicary—«

»You have seen her at her best,« Emmeline interrupted.

»Indeed! I understood from you that she is always at her worst in your presence; this has been an exceptional occasion, then, I infer.«

»She was always jealous of me from the first moment she set eyes on me,« Miss Vicary was beginning in tones of concentrated rage, when Carter interposed.

»It is quite idle on your part to attempt to explain or to account for the freaks and prejudices of the insane, Miss Vicary; and this gentleman, I believe, I am right in supposing, to be as slightly informed on the subject as yourself? Never make the mistake of advancing excuses for the madness of a mad person.«

They had come to the head of the stairs by this time, and as the two men drew back to allow the lady to precede them, Gilbert Denham managed to mutter the following words for Mr. Carter's benefit, unheard by Emmeline.

»She is far too sane for anything like coercion or restraint to be justifiable in her case; don't you think it might be awkward for you professionally

if a legal inquiry were made into the condition of that poor girl?»

»I have not the slightest fear for my professional reputation, nor of your interference,« Mr. Carter replied, blandly; »but I would advise you not to dabble in what solely concerns her mother; it will rebound on your head, and on the heads of those nearest to you if you do.«

»Thanks—but don't trouble yourself to be cautious on my account,« Gilbert laughed lightly, emphasising the last two words. And then he ran down and rejoined Emmeline, leaving Carter on the top stair in doubt as to whether his warning had been received with consideration or with contumely.

»But you'll surely stay to luncheon!« Emmeline exclaimed, as Gilbert began taking leave of her in the hall.

»Thank you, not to-day. I have promised myself to my sister.«

He spoke hurriedly, the fact being that his mind was thrown off its balance for the moment by the startling discrepancy there was between the mad woman he had imagined, and the mad woman he had seen. He wanted to get away by himself; and endeavour to analyse the vague, uncomfortable feeling of doubt that almost amounted to fear, which had seized him in her presence. He wanted to do this before he spoke about her to any one—especially before he spoke about her to Miss Vicary.

But Miss Vicary disliked the idea of being baulked of the prey which she had pursued into dangerous places. The risk she had run would seem to be for nothing if Gilbert got away from her now. More-

over she did not desire to bear the brunt of her mother's anger at her rash exhibition of Clarice alone.

»But when I ask you as a favour to stay here with us—with me?« she asked in her softest tones, and again the ordinarily composed face was stirred, and slightly bent down in a flush of unwonted confusion. And he remembered that the onus was on him still of pleasing this woman, and he was a man, and so pleasantly conscious that he had the power of pleasing her whenever he had the will, and so—he stayed!

In some undefinable way he found himself treated very much as if he were the private property of the young lady in whose society he had spent the long hours of the morning. Her mother gave him her left hand to shake when he came into the room—she had carefully picked up something fragile with her right, the instant she had caught sight of him. Further she insisted on explaining away this slight breach of social observance.

»It's nearest the heart we used to say in my young days, Mr. Denham, and though I'm the mother of such a grown-up daughter, my young days are not so long over neither.«

»One look at you suffices to convince a man of that; but the law of compensation works; youth is glorious, but to be the mother of two such grown up daughters as you have is more glorious still.«

Mrs. Waldron fluttered and moved her arms in her usual Gipsy-queen-like way, as if she were about to wrap herself in the folds of an imaginary cloak.

»A! my poor Clarice,« she presently said, in what was meant to be a resigned tone, but which failed to portray resignation by reason of the ghastliness of the apparent effort with which it was made; »my poor, poor child; she is a pitiable spectacle, and it hurts me to hear any one refer to *her* in the same breath as her sister.«

»Mr. Denham has seen Clarice, mamma,« Emmeline put in, and there was a light air of warning in the way she said it.

»Seen Clarice!« Mrs. Waldron exclaimed. Then, to the surprise of every one, the strong, stalwart woman turned pale with the anguish of fainting as she feebly muttered.

»Then we're——God forgive us!«

»Mother! mother! mother!« Emmeline cried, in encouraging, re-assuring, *reminding* accents.

»Mr. Denham has seen my unfortunate sister, but her unhappy state has not taught him to despise *us*. You're too sensitive.«

»Far too sensitive about it,« Gilbert said, coolly.

»Miss Clarice's state is not perfectly satisfactory at present—so much I must admit—but it will be entirely so in a short time, I should say, if she is subjected to different treatment from that of Mr. Carter.«

»We have the greatest reliance on Mr. Carter's judgment and kindness,« the mother said, determinedly, recovering herself, and steadying herself under the influence of some long looks from her daughter.

»Then your reliance is misplaced, I am inclined to think,« Gilbert said, lightly. And as at that

moment the object under discussion entered the room, Mrs. Waldron was spared the necessity of answering a man of whom she already stood in fear.

»Make him love you, Emmy? Emmy, *make* him love you,« she said, almost fiercely to her daughter, when the latter was about to start for the Bridge-House that night. »Tie his hands through chaining, his heart—for he's on the track, Emmy, he's on the track, and if he follows it up all my labour for you is lost.«

»The labour has been for yourself, mother,« Emmy answered, scornfully; »but all the same if I can I'll tie his hands.«

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE BRIDGE HOUSE AGAIN.

»GILBERT, I hope you won't crush me by telling me that I have done something that I had better have left undone, on this occasion especially,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron said, addressing her brother laughingly, and disregarding the cloud of thought and bewilderment that was lowering over her brother's brow.

»What have you done, Horry, dear? Wait a minute, though, till I've breathed a little of the air that is not full of the chokedamp of mystery.«

»No, no; mine is an utterly unimportant communication, after all. I'll out with it at once. Frank Stapylton has been here, and I asked him to come this evening. That is my news. But, Gilbert, what is yours?«

»That I am more completely at sea—more perfectly puzzled than I have ever been since I first put on my considering cap about this business of yours.«

»You have succeeded, then, in seeing the idiot sister?«

Horatia Waldron asked the question with an amount of eager vehemence that was perfectly natural and justifiable, considering all the circum-

stances of the case. But natural and justifiable as it was, it appeared to jar upon her brother.

»I have seen the—a—the lady who has been spoken of as a sister and an idiot by that mass of perverted feeling and cleverness, Miss Vicary.«

He spoke impulsively; there was a warm flush over his brow. Evidently some very strong sympathy, some emotion that was more powerful than pity, had been roused in cool, debonnaire Gilbert Denham.

»And is she such a distressing spectacle as they had led you to suppose? Is she too utterly bereft of reason for us to hope for any clue from her that may lead us into the right path, the path that may lead to the overthrow of the Vicarys?«

The rights of her boy were at stake, and the thought that they were so, that he had been defrauded of them in some way by those people of whom she was speaking, brought the bright colour to Horatia's face, and a ringing cadence into her voice.

»You'd pass over anybody's prostrate form in pursuing that path, I believe, Horry,« her brother said, meditatively.

»I would, I would. Let me once more see the path, and armed with my sense of little Gerald's rights and wrongs, I would tread it unflinchingly, even if a hundred foes or friends opposed my course and bid me turn back. But tell me of this woman.«

»This woman is the loveliest, sweetest creature I ever saw in my life,« Gilbert answered, slowly.

»She is no more bereft of reason than your are;

she has no more Vicary blood in her than you have; and she is kept a prisoner in their house for some purpose of their own, which I shall find out by-and-bye.«

»Gilbert!« The sister's face grew very pale, and an indescribable air of flagging in spirit came over her. »Gilbert, do you think that she is an undeveloped antagonistic influence?«

»I don't care to speculate about her. I have a presentiment that before long I shall arrive at some certain conclusion concerning the reason why they are treating her as they do. Meanwhile, feel as sure as I do that she can never be antagonistic to any one whose cause is good.«

»Supposing she shares the Vicary family feelings,« Horry persisted; »supposing she comes back to liberty and reason, and, backed up by the charms that have bewildered you, declares for these people who have in some way robbed my boy? What will you say then? Will you be a traitor to me, Gilbert, for the sake of a fair face? Will you cease to believe that Gerald's cause is good because she is antagonistic to it?

He took his sister's hands at this, and held them firmly, while he looked into her face.

»If her cause is ever antagonistic to your boy's, Horry,« he said, in a low voice, »it will be because your boy has no cause at all. We won't take fright at shadows, though, dear. At the same time, we must not shut our eyes to some things that we would rather not see. I'm glad Stapylton is coming to-night; he's a nice fellow, and will save you from dwelling too much on the Vicary mystery in Miss Vicary's presence.«

»And *I* am sorry that you should have seen the mad Miss Vicary,« Horatia persisted. »Probably they had prompted her to say a number of things that would help to bear out their story. Now, she would not have imposed on me, simply because she is an innocent agent in the imposition, aided by a pretty face. Did you get her to say a word about her stepfather?«

»Her what?«

»Her stepfather. Poor George Waldron was her stepfather, of course. I think I should have tested her by mentioning him.«

»It didn't occur to me to put her to the test in such a way,« Gilbert answered, uneasily.

»I wonder if I can ingratiate myself with Emmeline to-night sufficiently to induce her to let me see her sister.«

»Let me entreat you, in the name of common sense, for your own sake and your child's, don't attempt to do it. Both mother and daughter are as suspicious already as cats over poisoned meat, and if you say a word to Emmy, Emmy will interpose herself, a mountain of reserve, between me and my goal.«

Mrs. Arthur Waldron smiled, and shook her head.

»I don't like it, Gilbert; I don't like any of it. I know to-night that you will, by your manner to Miss Vicary, make my face burn at the thoughts of Bessie; and the Vicary wrath will be hot and heavy when they find out that your attentions to Emmeline have been meaningless and empty, by reason of there being a Mrs. Gilbert Denham already.«

»Our armoury is too badly supplied for you to quarrel with my choice of weapons,« her brother replied, quickly. »Poor Bessie! she need never fear that the shadow of unfaithfulness to her will fall on my heart on account of Miss Vicary.«

»What a trouble life is!« Horatia sighed, knitting her brows.

»Life being a bore, I think we had better dine«, Gilbert laughed. And then they sat down to dinner, and the conversation veered round to Frank Stapylton.

»It's a great pleasure to me to meet any one who knew Arthur so well as Mr. Stapylton did,« Arthur's widow began, pathetically.

»Yes; more especially as he's such an uncommonly nice fellow,« her brother replied, practically.

»He has asked if we will go over and lunch at his place, Gilbert, while you're here. He spoke about including those odious people from Larpington House in his invitation, and I didn't feel quite justified in saying 'Don't.'«

»I am glad you didn't. *He* might have thought you hardly justified, and have disregarded your demurrer—and that would have been awkward for you.«

»I had no fear of *that* before my eyes,« Horatia said, tossing her head ever so slightly, »only I thought it would have a look of inconsistency, as he is to meet the junior member of that most obnoxious firm here to-night. I shouldn't like Mr. Stapylton to think me inconsistent or weak at all, for Arthur's sake.«

»My dear Horry, how heartily I shall hail the

day when women cease to think it necessary to go through a little bit of the suttee business.«

»What do you mean, Gilbert? No, don't tell me. If you think that I am capable of feigning feeling and falsifying motive in this manner, then I no longer care either for your meaning or your opinion.«

She spoke, with a heightened colour, truly, but with tones that were not raised in the slightest degree. She was in a genuine, womanly rage; but her brother liked her for it, and admired her for the way she portrayed it.

»My meaning is very simple, and very far from being offensive, Horry, dear,« he said, affectionately. »It is a form of suttee, the spirit of deprecation in which some very sweet and sensible women whose husbands have died, always speak of the possibility of their regard for other men, or other men's regard for them. Why on earth shouldn't you desire that this young fellow should think you 'consistent,' and other admirable things, for your own sake, as well as for Arthur's?«

»We really need not go into the subject in this exhaustive way, Gilbert,« she answered, lightly.

»Granted that I spoke in a way that strikes you as being too set, too conventional, too carefully copied from the pattern the world has cut for us, you must admit that your words would bear an interpretation that might hurt me a little. I love Arthur's memory too well, I am too thoroughly devoted to Arthur's children, to care very much about other men's opinion of me.«

»Our friends are coming in time to save you

from proceeding with your defence,« he laughed, as a peal at the front-door bell announced the advent of one of the guests. Then he went over to her, and held the face, over which a half-pouting expression had crept, up, and kissed her brow. »My dear little sister,« he said, more gravely, »if it isn't Frank Stapylton, it will be some other man, I hope. I'm tired of your sacrificing yourself to the idea of little Gerald's future magnificence. If the boy is ever to have his own—if it is his own to have—he will gain it without his mother going through the mildest form of suttee on his account.«

He had to drop his voice, and speak his last words in a very indistinct tone, and Horatia had not a moment in which to answer him: for the door was opened, and Emmeline Vicary, in a refulgent *demi-toilette* that seemed to billow all over the room, was upon them.

Her mother's last words were ringing in her ears, and though, as a rule, her mother's words were not what she cared to dwell upon very carefully, still, now she did attach greater weight to them, and did mean to act up to the spirit of their advice. Her inclination and her duty marched well together, and were equally potent in their demands upon her to make this man identify his interests with her own as soon as possible.

They were not at all in harmony, these three who were brought together thus. The hostess half-believed that her brother and her guest had a secret understanding. The guest half-believed the same thing of her friend and her hostess. Gilbert

Denham was the only one of the three, in fact, who was not disturbed in the slightest degree by the thoughts of the other two.

In justice to Miss Vicary's powers of appreciation, it must be stated that from the very onset she never underrated the magnitude of the task that was before her. She realised fully that in this contest a woman endowed with every womanly charm was ranged against her. Emmeline Vicary knew that family feeling, cultivation, a sense of right, and the sympathy of the world were one and all enrolled under Mrs. Arthur Waldron's banner. And with all this knowledge to the fore, she did not fear the fate that might be before her too much. She dared as much, almost, as a thoroughbred could have dared, in confronting Gilbert Denham's sister this night.

For the course was such a dangerous one! It was so full of patrician pit-falls for her plebeian feet! Nevertheless, she was a dangerous adversary for that gently-born, honest woman, who was awaiting her in fear and trembling. For Emmeline was utterly unscrupulous. She had so much to gain, and so little to lose. And, additionally, she was sufficiently in love with Gilbert Denham to soften and subdue herself, and generally put herself at her best.

By-and-bye matters were made much pleasanter for them all by the arrival of Frank Stapylton. Constraint vanished in his presence, as ice does before the sun, for he was not at this juncture sufficiently fascinated by the fair widow to feel awkward in her society. That stage had not been

arrived at, although an experienced eye could have detected that he was fast approaching it.

But this night he was heart (or fancy) free enough to be entertaining—a thing a man in love never can be, by any chance, save to the woman he is in love with; and so, under his influence, the reign of ease was inaugurated, and the quartette divided in a natural manner. Gilbert Denham and his prey conversing in low tones on the sofa, Horatia Waldron and her prey at the piano, where the lady warbled him along skilfully towards that stage which, it has been distinctly stated, had not yet been reached by him when he came in.

Emmeline was the first to revert to the subject of the morning's excitement, and she did it judiciously.

»I can't tell you what a relief it is both to mamma and myself to find that poor Clarice made such a favourable impression upon you,« she said, softly.

»And I can't tell you how glad I am that I succeeded in overcoming your scruples about my seeing her,« he replied, heartily. »What a pretty, attractive woman she is! Let me instil into you a portion of my own firm belief in her ultimate perfect recovery.«

Miss Vicary shook her head. »If she did recover, Mr. Denham,« she said with a heightened colour, »it would not be for your happiness nor for mine,« she added, in a faltering under tone that was designed to make him suppose that she was suffering from a preliminary pang of jealousy on account of her lovely sister's charms. Gilbert

Denham knew well what she meant him to believe; but though he was a man, and though he thought that she was in love with him, he did not put faith in the sincerity of her suggestion.

Her remark was a perplexing one—or it would have been a perplexing one to a less ready man than Gilbert Denham. Even he hesitated for a moment before he replied to it. Then he went on his self-selected path more recklessly than before.

»Your fear is groundless.« He almost whispered these words, for he shrank from letting his sister hear how far he was going in her cause. »Your sister, under any circumstances, will be powerless to affect our relations towards one another. Try to trust me fully.«

He was leaning forwards, bending slightly in her direction as he spoke, and one of his hands was resting on the sofa between Emmeline and himself. Suddenly, as he said »trust me fully,« her hand slipped into his, and bending down to meet his gaze, she spoke his name, »Gilbert!« with a passionate softness that told of her being terribly in earnest.

»Let us talk of the sweetest topic in the world, Emmeline,« he muttered, and his anxiety to get to the bottom of the mystery of Larpington House caused him to mutter it very ardently. »Let us talk of the sweetest topic in the world, Emmeline. Tell me your sister's love-story.«

»Her love-story is the most painful topic in the world to me, instead of being the sweetest,« Miss Vicary answered, pettishly.

»Did she love beneath her, or above her, a

star or a clod?» he persisted, and he constrained himself, in his anxiety for an answer, to press Emmeline's hand rather more closely.

»How keen you are about it!« she replied, with awkward jealousy. »Why will you think so much of Clarice, and so little of me?«

»Clarice has been the means of furthering our intimacy greatly. I consider that I owe her a debt of gratitude. In winning an introduction to her, I have won a more complete knowledge of you.«

»And now that you have the more complete knowledge of me, what good will it do you or me?« she asked, earnestly. And Gilbert shrugged his shoulders, and thought—

»Verily, a determined young woman, this! How is it all to end?«

Aloud he said—

»This much good, at any rate—it is making the present pass more pleasantly, and time is young. We can afford to let the future take care of itself.«

»Shall you be here so much longer, that you can afford to waste time with me by idle talk of Clarice?« she asked, boldly.

»Shall I say that I shall stay here while my sister and yourself care to have me? And shall I add, that if I am bidden I may remain at Larpington altogether.«

»All this is very fine and very flattering,« Miss Vicary thought, shrewdly; »but none of it's an offer of marriage, or even a declaration of love. He must say something more definite than he has

already said, before mamma will believe that I haven't been foolishly rash and over-confident in showing him Clarice.«

»Mr. Denham,« she murmured, suddenly, »are you aware that all this time you have been holding my hand?«

»Quite aware of it; and before I relinquish it you shall pledge yourself to show perfect and entire confidence in me,« he whispered. And her fervid »I will,« in reply, sounded ominous.

»I can't bear cautious women,« Gilbert Denham went on. »Caution in a man is a barely endurable quality, but in a girl it's simply appalling. I shouldn't like to think, for instance, that you were hedging yourself round with a lot of small mysteries and precautionary measures. I shouldn't like to think that you put even an invisible fence up between yourself and me.«

»What do you mean?« She grew red and bewildered, and the pair at the piano ceased their strains at the same inopportune moment; and, altogether, Gilbert Denham had the feeling upon him of being snatched from sudden destruction just as he was on the brink of compromising himself most horribly.

»Miss Vicary, won't you play something for us, or sing something?« Horatia asked, rising from the music-stool as she spoke, and presenting a perplexed countenance to the still more perplexed occupants of the sofa. The truth was, that the last words which Horatia had been persuaded to warble to Frank Stapylton were charged with such fervour that they seemed to herself, as she

sang them with feeling, like an admission of some sentiment which she was most anxious to conceal from him. All her brother's remarks about the special form of suttee which she had indicated an intention of practising rankled in her memory, and caused her to feel and display an amount of agitation which, she felt painfully certain, Frank Stapylton would attribute to—the right cause. In her confusion, she turned and addressed Miss Vicary, calling down Miss Vicary's curses and her brother's blessings on her head for interrupting them at what Emmeline believed to be a delicate crisis.

Frank Stapylton, too, the disturbing element, was a little disappointed, and altogether thrown out of gear, by the abrupt termination to the fair romance he had just begun composing. There had been something alternately soothing and thrilling in watching that pretty woman's mobile face, and listening to her rich, soft contralto, as she sang different versions of the old, old story, with himself for her sole audience. It had come to him to feel that it would be pleasant to watch that face and listen to that voice often—perhaps always! And just as this feeling had developed, and imparted additional intensity and ardour to his gaze, Horatia had suddenly wheeled round and addressed Miss Vicary—and lo! the dream was dispelled!

With a man's perversity, the moment the check came, Mr. Stapylton became more eager in the pursuit. He had told himself, or rather allowed himself to feel, on first seeing her, that if she had not been the widow of his old friend, Arthur Waldron, she was gifted with precisely that sort

of grace, and beauty, and intelligence which would have taken captive his unoccupied heart. But to-night, under the influence of the evidently happy feeling which had inspired her as she sang words of tenderness to him, he had erased the saving clause, and declared to himself that the fact of her widowhood, or rather of her former wifeness, would no longer intervene. Nothing that was past had the power of making her other than she was in the present, and that was simply the woman most to be coveted as a wife of any woman he had ever seen. As he thought of his old home with her in it as its mistress, he felt inclined to break all bonds of prudence and etiquette and tell her at once to what extent he was a slave and she a victor. And so, when she turned away, and made as though she would have joined her brother and Miss Vicary, he followed her closely, feeling ten times more eager than he had been while the opportunity was his own at the piano.

Miss Vicary could play, and sing, too, after a fashion—a fashion that made the ears tingle, and the understanding totter, of the cultivated minority. However, on this occasion she made a noise, and so Frank Stapylton was grateful when, under cover of a crushing series of wrong notes, he contrived to whisper to his hostess—

»Do take a turn round the garden in the moonlight. It's not very cold, and I want to tell you something.«

»What about?« she asked, uneasily, and then she blushed at her own uneasiness, grew confused and weak and remorseful.

»What about! Oh, about George Waldron's marriage,« he replied, adroitly fixing on a topic that he knew would fetch her from her stronghold of confused reserve. And when he said that she went out with him without hesitation—without a single thought of suttee.

»And now, Gilbert,« Miss Vicary began, pausing in her playing at once as the other pair went out through the window, »will you tell me exactly what you mean by objecting to even an invisible fence between us?«

CHAPTER IX.

»ARTHUR WAS RIGHT.«

»WHAT do I mean?« Gilbert Denham repeated the words she had addressed to him with a force and intensity that came from his desire to gain time. He knew well enough himself what he »meant« — to screw her secret from her at any price. But he also knew that the abrupt disclosure of his meaning, in what she would probably think its »naked deformity,« would startle her clear away from the confessional.

The time that he deemed necessary for his purpose he gained very easily after all. His hand was clasping hers, his arm was round her waist, her face was shrouding itself upon his shoulder, and the position was one that the lady was apparently in no haste to free herself from. It fell to his part to make the separating move; and having realised that it was in his part, he made it decisively.

He rose up, still holding her hands in his, and stood before her. Love-blinded as she was it struck her that there was more of the gaoler fastening on the handcuffs than of the lover in his grasp. Love-blinded as she was, too, she saw that his penetrating gaze was not concentrated upon the discovery of any veiled love for him which she might be jealously guarding, and she shrank and turned away from it with a sickening sensation of coming evil upon her.

»I mean this,« he said, slowly, »that I would shut my heart against a woman who withheld a confidence, however unimportant that confidence might be, from me.«

»And would you never close it against one who risked everything in reposing a confidence?« she asked, eagerly. »Oh, Gilbert, there's nothing that I wouldn't sacrifice for you, and to you; but if I told you the only secret I have, it wouldn't do you any good, and those you love would be no better for it.«

»Let me be the judge of that,« he said. He would have risked, dared, courted any danger then for the sake of carrying his point.

»And what is to be my reward?«

She uttered the words with a hot, clear force that startled him. It was quite evident that she was ready to part with her secret; but she would sell it, would fix the price, and see it paid, and would not contemplate the weakness of giving it away, whatever persuasive power he might put on.

And so he named a price, with a lowered head, with an humbled heart, with a ghastly conviction growing upon him, that in some at present unforeseen way he would be enabled to pay it, and would shrink from doing so.

His naming of a price—his surrender, as she rightly deemed it—gave Emmeline Vicary a power she had never experienced before in her intercourse with this man.

»The reward you offer would be ample for a far more valuable prize than I shall be, Gilbert,«

she said with an affectedly light depreciation of herself that was infinitely irksome and wearisome to the man who wanted her secret and not her silliness.

»Let me be the judge of that, as I said before,« he replied.

»No, no; I have always discouraged impatience and curiosity on principle. I will only gratify yours by telling you poor Clarice's story on the day that it will become my duty to obey you. When I'm your wife, you will find that I have no concealments from you. Shall you tell your sister to-night?«

»Tell her what?«

»That we are engaged; that you have proposed to me, and I have accepted you.«

He almost groaned as he turned away from her. Her words put the position in which he had placed himself before him in a horribly strong light. Yet she was justified in using those words. The sentence he had used in naming the price he would pay would indisputably bear the interpretation she had put upon it.

The conviction that he never could pay it—the reflection that the ability to do so would simply be odious to him—the remembrance of good, trusting, unexacting Bessie, his wife—all these rushed into his mind in a moment as Emmeline so unmistakably evinced her determination to have her pound of flesh. And so it was, with a hardly-suppressed groan, that he turned away from her suggestion that he should tell his sister of the treachery, the perfidy, the bitter

folly he had been guilty of this night, on account of her boy's unestablished rights.

But he knew that to falter in seeming would be to rouse Miss Vicary's suspicions, and to undo the work he had been labouring at so assiduously lately. So he told himself that just for a little while longer he would play his false part, and when it had won him what he wanted he would proclaim himself a married man, and openly avow the real motive of his deception.

»No; let us keep our secret, the secret of our attachment, of the unpremeditated regard which has sprung up between us, for a time,« he answered. And then he added, fearing to trust himself alone with her any longer, »Shall we go out and join the others?«

»As you like,« she said sulkily. She hated the suggestion of delay. Delay meant danger to her before she became Gilbert Denham's wife. After that coveted consummation she cared not what happened. »For his will surely never be the hand to throw me down and proclaim me an impostor, when I'm his wife,« she argued.

But in spite of her sulkiness, he was firm now.

»Yes, let us join the others. I'll tell you why,« he said, with an air of eagerness that was assumed, and the assumption of which Miss Vicary saw through clearly. »Horry has some absurd notions about everlasting devotion and fidelity to the memory of her late husband, and she will worry herself all night with the idea that she has been doing violence to these two qualities if we let Stapylton keep her out *tête-à-tête* any longer.«

»It seemed to me that she was willing enough to go,« Miss Vicary muttered. »I believe, too, that you are tired of our *tête-à-tête*, and that it's not consideration for your sister only that makes you in such a hurry to join her.«

»Larpington house stands out well in the moonlight—let us go and look at it.«

»I wish I had never seen Larpington House,« she cried, with quick, savage energy. »I wish I had never heard of it. I shall come to some dreadful sorrow through my connection with Larpington House. I feel sure of that.«

»Are those your sentiments really?« he asked. »And all the time outsiders fancy that you are enjoying the thought of your future proprietorship. Indeed,« here he looked at her keenly, »some people go so far as to assert that it is on account of your pride in being the sole heiress that you show so little sisterly distress about your sister Clarice.«

There swept across her face, at this, such a look of pained uncertainty, of doubt, and distress, that out of mere manly pity for the »weaker vessel,« he exclaimed hurriedly—

»I didn't mean to hurt you by the allusion. I only mentioned it as a proof of the manner in which rumour misrepresents people.«

»You think me unnatural about Clarice, don't you?« she interrogated. Then suddenly she changed the form of her inquiry, and asked, »You would think worse of me for being callous about a sister's sorrow than about anything else, wouldn't you?«

»I should,« he said, decisively.

»Well then, I tell you—no, I don't think I can

tell you to-night. I don't think I dare risk anything to-night. I should like to be *quite* happy a little longer.«

This tone of pathos was a new thing in her. Hitherto she had vibrated between being over demonstrative and unpleasantly morose and glum. The new phase was more fetching naturally to a man, and like a man Gilbert Denham responded to it kindly and injudiciously.

»I shall regret it deeply if I am ever the cause of unhappiness coming to you.«

»Yet you will be the cause of the greatest unhappiness to me and to others,« she said, hesitatingly. »You can't help yourself. If you don't betray the confidence I repose in you, I shall always feel that you're thinking of it, and thinking less well of me; and if you do betray it, there can be nothing but misery before me, look which way I will.«

»We are drifting into a region of the most appalling verbal gloom,« he said, lightly. »Come out and look for Horry.« And so at last he carried his point of putting an end to confidential intercourse, for that night at least, between the determined Miss Vicary and himself.

The other pair, meanwhile, had not found the time long, nor the *tête-à-tête* embarrassing in the smallest degree. There was far less confusion for Mrs. Arthur Waldron in the fact of Frank Stapylton occasionally pressing the hand which rested on his arm, than there had been in the looks which lived in his eyes and would be answered while she had been singing. Moreover, the free night

air wafted away nearly all the doubts and scruples which had beset her while sitting in a room in which each article of furniture was identified with Arthur's children and their right to her sole interest and regard and attention. Out in the garden, in the soft, sweet moonlight, she seemed to belong more to herself. And the result of this change of feeling was that she ceased to shudder and turn away from the thought of rendering a portion of her interest and regard and attention to the man by her side.

The most sheltered walk in the garden was one that, happily for Mr. Stapylton's designs of concentrating her attention on himself, did not command a view of Larpington House. And up and down this walk they sauntered, he talking of a topic that is invariably the most interesting to a woman when she is beginning to love a man, himself; she listening with a beautiful resignation to the circumstances that made her his only listener.

With the natural hunger that a woman feels when her heart is touched to hear if his has ever been touched by some happier woman, she approached the subject of his youth, and his manner of spending it.

»What made you flee your country in the way you did, when you were so young? Was it merely the real English roving spirit, or had you a reason?«

»Well, I was always an excitable fellow, fond of change of scene and variety of acquaintances,« he confessed, with a laugh.

»Arthur used to say——« She checked herself, and he asked—

»What did he say? Tell me. That I was such a restless fellow that I should never settle down? He used to tell me that often.«

»No; that was not what I was going to say. But perhaps I had better not say it.«

How utterly feeble and meaningless these preliminaries sound to every other ear than the special one for whose benefit they are uttered. How thoroughly a third person is bored by the false starts two incipient lovers make perpetually before they get clear off on to the straight course of a perfect understanding. Yet for all the feebleness and meaninglessness of them to others, one would not oneself be without the glorious experience that they aid in giving.

»Perhaps I had better not say it,« the advocate for the observance of suttee said with a falter in her voice; and Frank Stapyhton's answer was a pressure of her hand and the whispered words—

»You may say anything to me—anything you like. Whatever you say will be sure to be right.«

He was getting more impressive every moment, and every moment Horatia's resolve to dedicate every soft and tender thought, for the remainder of her life, to the memory of her husband, was growing weaker. Her remembrance of »what Arthur used to say« seemed to her like a direct interposition of Providence.

»He used to say that he thought you must have had a disappointment, and that that drove

you to change of scene, in hopes that it might prove a panacea.«

Even as she put the possibility of its having been the case to him, she fervently hoped that he would deny it, and affirm that Arthur had been mistaken. For wife, mother, widow as she was, there was still a certain amount of young, unsullied, womanly feeling about Horatia Waldron; and it would have been pleasant to know, if she ever did allow him to profess affection for herself, that he had never professed it for any one else.

It was a little depressing, therefore, for her, when he answered in sober, veracious accents—

»Arthur was right.«

»Forgive me for having probed a wound,« she cried, quickly. »I knew I had better have left my remark unsaid. How foolish I was!«

She spoke in such eager deprecation of her own indiscretion, that he had not the opportunity of stopping the flow of the stream of her self-reproach until it reached this juncture. But when she denounced herself as foolish, he said—

»Foolish! Anything but that. There was sweet wisdom, as well as sweet kindness, in touching on a topic that a man never knows how he may treat until it is touched upon. Yes, Mrs. Waldron, Arthur was right. I was awfully fond of a girl when I was a young fellow; and it was the old story. Don't you know? She didn't care for me.«

The words, »What a blind fool she must have been!« were on Horatia's lips, but she checked them, hard as the task of doing so was. A genuine woman is always intolerant to any indifference

shown towards a man she loves by another woman. However, Horatia constrained herself strongly, and merely said in reply to his confession—

»Perhaps she cared for somebody else?«

»That was just it, don't you see? It was a quick thing altogether. I met her at a ball in Brighton, and she fetched me tremendously in the course of five round dances I had with her. Then I met her at a picnic; and then I was her escort one day when we made up a riding-party. The end of it was that I, being an impulsive young fool, I suppose, proposed to her, and had for answer that she was already engaged.«

»Was she pretty?« Horatia asked. Elsewhere I have registered my firm belief in this being the first question every woman asks about the one who has been preferred to her, or has preceded her, or in any way rivalled her.

His answer was distressingly decisive —

»She was beautiful—a glorious girl with golden hair, and eyes—well, eyes that were not a bit like any that I have ever seen in any other woman's face.«

»And she married?« Horatia questioned, half hopefully. Fully as she intended immolating herself on the shrine of the deceased Arthur's memory, it would have given her a pang to hear that the woman Frank Stapylton had loved was still free.

»Yes; I believe she married. I have never heard of it; but in that one letter that I had from her she said she was 'going to be married very soon'. She didn't tell me my rival's name, or go into any details at all; and I was thankful that

she didn't, for at the time I was too sore to care to have a well-defined idea of the man she preferred to me.«

»And for her sake you have remained unmarried all these years?« Horatia continued, fluttering about a subject that was painful to her with that curious persistence which characterises women when their hearts are touched.

»I can't profess such constancy,« he said, with a laugh that was infinitely comforting to her. »The truth is, I got over it so rapidly that I was half-ashamed of myself, it looked so uncommonly like shallowness of feeling, don't you know? I suppose the real reason of my remaining unmarried was, that I never saw any one I could fall in love with again, until lately.«

His tones were very low as he said the last two words, and Horatia's heart fluttered in a way that she felt to be very reprehensible. The conviction was borne in upon her mind abruptly that the time was ripe as far as he was concerned, and that if she did not administer a check to him, he would rashly force her to come to a decision, or to commit herself to the promise of coming to a decision this very night.

And this she certainly was not prepared to do in spite of those pangs of self-reproach from which she was suffering. An hour ago she had told herself that if this man paid her the crowning honour of making her an open offer of his love, it would be her duty to her dead husband's memory, and to her living children's rights, to refuse him. But an hour had passed since she had given this

judgment against herself, and the possibility of her being eventually induced to reverse it was already before her.

For during this hour they had talked of love, and although it was not of love for herself, the topic had touched her to additional tenderness. So, at least this night, she could not bring herself to make an end of this new strain of music which was fast making itself heard in her life. Accordingly, she put the subject away from her delicately, deftly, as only a woman can, stopped him from further speech about it just then in a way that was almost more pleasing to hear than if she had suffered him to pursue it, for he was a man who liked reserve in a woman—preferred wooing to being wooed, in fact.

»We'll talk about this another day, won't we?« she said, rather shyly. »In my pleasure in listening to you, I am forgetting all about my other guest.« And just at that moment, very opportunely, Gilbert Denham and Miss Vicary stepped out into the garden, and the four marched up and down for a few minutes longer in line.

But they each and all found that there was no increase of happiness to any one of them by reason of this arrangement. To Horatia it appeared that all the silvery radiance had fled from the moonbeams, now that they fell on the form of Miss Vicary, who was stepping steadily along on the other side of Frank Stapylton. A woman, when she begins to be in love, is so prone to jealousy, that she is apt to invest every other woman who approaches »the object« with some indefinable charm

which she was never suspected of possessing before. It actually now gave Mrs. Arthur Waldron a twinge of pain as she reflected, »George Waldron was to the full as attractive, refined, and clever, as Frank Stapylton, and George Waldron married this girl's mother. What if the daughter exercises the same sort of witch-craft over Frank Stapylton?« A chill fell upon her suddenly, and she almost shuddered as she said—

»How much colder it has got, Miss Vicary! I shall get into disgrace with your mother if I keep you out in the night air, and send you home with a cough. How fascinating the fire looks from outside!« she added, passing in through the window as she spoke, and looking round, expecting to see the others follow her.

Frank Stapylton was the only one who obeyed her invitation. Miss Vicary put a detaining hand on Gilbert Denham's arm, and muttered—

»Stay out here for a minute, will you? You were anxious to come.«

»And I'm delighted to remain,« he answered, as lightly as his growing dread of her causing him to completely surrender would allow him to do.

»Shall I see you to-morrow?«

»Yes, probably; I mean certainly you will.«

»Come further away from the window,« she said, impatiently drawing him away into the shade.

»Gilbert, you have grown cool to me with very curious quickness. What is the back-thought that has chilled you? Because I know you must have had one to have altered so suddenly.«

»The thought of your want of confidence in

me,« he answered, in a low voice. »You have a secret which you persist in keeping concealed from me.«

She almost writhed as she exclaimed—

»Gilbert, don't press me too hard, for I love you.«

»If you did you would trust me,« he said, quietly.

»I will. You shall see that I will. Not to-night, though—I dare not to-night. You'll know how much I love you when I tell you what will cost me so much—when you know what I risk. But I'd pay any price—I'd risk anything to keep you from growing cold to me—I would; you know it. When you come to-morrow, how will you come? Not merely as a friend, surely?«

»She is a determined young person, and no mistake,« was his mental comment on this last inquiry of hers. But aloud he said,

»That depends entirely on the way you treat me.«

»Ah! if it depends on my treatment of you, then you will have no excuse for coldness,« she answered, triumphantly.

»I ought to have said that it depends entirely on how much confidence you see fit to do me the honour of reposing in me.«

»Those are your terms, and you won't lower them? You'll stick to them, though you see they cut me to the heart?« she asked, bitterly.

»It is a very small thing, after all, for a man to ask of a woman who professes what you have professed for me,« he said, quietly.

»The plain English of it is, that you want to hear all I can tell you about Clarice?« she said, in an angry, despairing tone.

»That is the plain English of it.«

»Well, on your head be the responsibility of all the unhappiness that will follow your knowledge. Be warned in time; for the sake of every one you love let Clarice and her past and future alone.«

»Then we say good-bye to each other for ever when we part to-night, Miss Vicary. I shall pursue my investigation of Clarice's case in another direction.«

»Oh, Gilbert, don't, don't say such words!« she cried, intemperately. »When you come to-morrow I'll tell you all you want to know; and—you won't turn against me, will you? I've done nothing that need prevent an honest man making me his wife.«

She spoke ardently, eagerly, and his conscience stabbed him sharply.

»We shall each have to ask pardon of the other, I'm thinking,« he said, mourn-fully; and she was about to question him closely about himself, when his sister called from the window,

»Gilbert, here's a telegram for you!«

They went in then, and he opened it under the fire of the keen observation of Emmeline Vicary; opened it, and read, in brief telegraphic language, that his wife was dead.

CHAPTER X.

EMMELINE'S APPEAL.

THERE in his hand were the tidings of the sudden and awfully unexpected death of the wife he had left only a few weeks ago in the full vigour of health and strength. And there close beside him stood the eagerly expectant woman who was so determined to marry him, and between whom and himself that one barrier of »Bessie« had been removed in such a ghastly manner. He was stupefied by this shock, but still he had to go on acting a part.

To give forth the news—to let the appalling fact escape him now, would be to render all the plans and strategies of the last few weeks worse than idle and vain. It would be to turn them into poisoned weapons wherewith Miss Vicary would be justified in attacking him. It would be to ruin little Gerald's cause—if little Gerald had one—it would be to cut himself off for ever from that further sight of, and speech with Clarice which he had perilled so much to gain. So, though his heart was really wrung, though his nerves were quivering, though the vanity and instability and worthlessness generally of all earthly things were very patent to him as the shadow of the shock fell upon him, he still overmastered his emotion, and retained his self-possession.

»What news have you, Gilbert?« his sister asked, anxiously, as he folded up the telegram and put it in his pocket; »what news has come to our lotus-eating village in such haste?«

»A business matter that I must talk to you about by-and-bye,« he said, and there was an unsteady quaver in his tones, a certain appearance of effort in his smiles, that made Emmeline Vicary regard him wistfully.

»The carriage for Miss Vicary« was mercifully announced just then, and Frank Stapylton was saying »good night« in the low meaning tones in which men do say the commonplace words when they address them to women who are beginning to be a little more than other women to them. »And you will come over and lunch at my place while your brother is with you?« were the first words of the farewell that fell on Gilbert Denham's ear.

»Yes; that is, if Gilbert—« Horatia was beginning, when her brother interrupted her.

»It mustn't be just yet, Stapylton. I have to run up to town to-morrow on«—(he had to gulp down a suffocating sob before he could say the word)—»business.«

»Is your business so imperative that you must attend to it in such a hurry?« Emmeline asked, with what appeared to Mrs. Arthur Waldron to be most impertinent familiarity.

»It is my first duty in life to attend to it,« he answered, with such startling force that Emmeline instantly had a dark vision of some »other designing woman with a prior claim on him«—a vision that

roused all the slumbering, tigress jealousy in her breast and urged her to wrestle with his resolve.

»Can anything come before the duty you owe me of coming to me to-morrow after what has passed to-night?« she muttered; and Gilbert Denham knew as he listened to her that he would be unable to break her chains with the same light ease with which he had forged them.

»My business will take me away by the earliest train I can catch to-morrow morning. I must defer my promised visit to you until my return——«

»You will be back soon, then?« she asked, eagerly. And when he had pledged himself to »be back soon,« she remembered that her hostess was waiting to say »good night« all this time, and that Mr. Stapylton must think her manner to Mr. Denham rather odd on the whole.

The final farewells were exchanged presently, and as soon as the brother and sister were alone, he took out the telegram and handed it to her, and she read it with a burst of womanly woe and sympathy that brought the tears into his eyes.

Their conversation was merely a stream of confused conjecture and speculation naturally. Bessie had been quite well when her husband heard from her two days ago, and now she was dead! These were the only two points on which they could speak with anything like certainty. But still they sat up discussing the subject, rolling it about and viewing it miserably in every light until it was time for Gilbert to leave in the morning. And throughout their whole discourse there was no mention made by either of them of Emmeline Vicary.

As he took leave of his sister he gave her one caution.

»This must not be mentioned here to any one—not even to Stapylton, Horry,« he said, sadly.

»Oh! but, Gilbert, how can I help it?« she answered, in real dismay, as a thoroughly feminine difficulty presented itself. »The deeper mourning that I must put on will make people wonder and question. Do let us have done with mystery.«

»Let them wonder and question,« he answered, almost savagely. »Never mind the deeper mourning, child, don't make any change for my sake; above all things, don't let that horrible girl at Larpington House get hold of the fact of my being really a free man.«

So Mrs. Arthur Waldron was left alone for a few days with another secret to keep—the secret of her sister-in-law's death. It was a harder one to preserve in perfect integrity than even the secret of poor Bessie's existence had been. A dozen times during the day she was on the point of explaining to her children or her servants why she felt depressed and looked sad. Some people—women, especially—are addicted to the degrading weakness—love to be steeped in mystery, and to involve an action or a circumstance in an air of guilty secrecy. But Horatia Waldron was not of this order. She loathed anything like subterfuge, trickery, or concealment, as she loathed every form of lying, both active and passive. Her true good womanly intuition taught her that there was a foul taint in every kind of machination and mystery. And yet here she was, her soul burdened with a

secret that made it ache, and she was told that she was bound to keep it for her child's sake.

The burden became a heavier one when later in the day Miss Vicary came down and oppressed the young widow with her friendly sympathy about Gilbert's departure. The secret nearly rushed out in wrath more than once as courageous Emmy talked of him with a sort of affectionate freedom that nearly drove his sister wild, calling him »Gilbert« even, and assuming a sort of right in him, that Horry felt to be »indecent« under the real circumstances of the case. If glances could have slain, Miss Vicary would have been a dead woman the instant she finished the following sentence:—

»His going away just now is worse for me than for you, dear, for—how shall I tell you?—I suppose you guess that we are going to be sisters!«

»What!« Horatia said, in a most uncomplimentary tone of utter amazement and disgust. Then as glances would not kill, and she was bound to keep this secret, she went on—

»Excuse my expression of unbounded astonishment; but Gilbert has never even hinted at such a possibility; as a rule, the announcement is made to a man's nearest relations by himself.«

»But this is such an exceptional case,« Miss Vicary pleaded in extenuation of her gallant defiance of all the established rules of maiden modesty. »This is such an exceptional case; he was coming up to speak to mamma to-day.«

»He *couldn't* have promised that,« Horatia interrupted in real dismay. »Why, last night, he didn't know——«

She checked herself just in time. The statement that he didn't know last night till the telegram came that his wife was dead had nearly rushed out then. But the jerk with which she checked herself hurt her; jarred through all her soul, and shook it into stronger revolt than ever against this system of deception.

»He didn't know what?« Miss Vicary asked, suspiciously; »he didn't know the news contained in this telegram, I suppose you mean? what had that to do with it?«

»With what?« Horatia asked, feebly. She was not a proficient in the arts of lying and evasion. It frightened her to feel herself getting every moment more and more involved in a web of deception. For the first time she felt that the Larpington House secret might be purchased too dearly.

»I ask what had the news contained in Gilbert's telegram got to do with his speaking to my mamma about me?« Miss Vicary repeated, with a fixedness of purpose that made Horatia quail. »And as to its being usual for a man to tell his nearest relations of such a contemplated change in his life, that's all nonsense, when he hasn't the opportunity, and the girl he is engaged to has. I won't ask you to say you're glad to hear what I have told you, for I can see you're not glad, Mrs. Arthur; but after all, if you only knew——«

»If I only knew what?« Horatia asked, wearily. »No, it would be absurd for me to feign gladness about what makes me feel wretched. I am tongue-tied; for I love my brother.«

»And you don't think me worthy to be loved by your brother?«

»It's not that even—together,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron rejoined, »I feel bewildered and unhappy, and I do wish you would refrain from speaking any more on this subject until my brother comes back.«

»I have told mamma, and I have written to some of my friends, and the servants in the house know it already,« Miss Vicary said, with dogged determination. »I am not ashamed of anything I've done, and if you are ashamed for your brother—«

»I am, I am,« Horatia burst in intemperately, thinking of the falsehoods that must have been uttered and implied by Gilbert—thinking of them with deep humiliation for him and bitter loving sorrow that they should have been spoken by him on little Gerald's account. »Was there no other way to the solution of the Larpington House mystery than through this valley of degradation?« she asked herself. »Must we go on struggling in this dismal swamp of deception; and when we get out of it, shall we find ourselves on firm, fair ground again?« As she asked herself these questions, it was a small wonder that the truth escaped her in words that were not over courteous, and that in response to Miss Vicary's remark, »And if you are ashamed for your brother,« she should have sung out, ! ! »I am, I am.«

A flickering, fast-changing look of dislike gleamed over Miss Vicary's face for a moment. Then it changed in a wonderful way (for hers was not a mobile face) into a look of pity. »The sacrifice I

make to your brother's curiosity and my love for him, will cost you more than it will me, my fine lady,« she thought. But she guarded her gates of speech well, and only said,

»I'll be as honest as you are, Mrs. Arthur, and tell you that I don't care a bit for your feelings on the subject; your brother and I love each other; you will be a very minor consideration to us both.«

She spoke steadily and slowly as she threw the gauntlet down. And for the first time during the whole of their intercourse a tinge of respect crept into Horatia's feelings towards Miss Vicary.

»She's brave and honest,« the widow thought, »in the avowal of her love for Gilbert, in her utter regardlessness of all that is outside it; and he is alluring her with a lie, and I am abetting him, and oh, the hollow mockery of it all, the utter falsity of it all, the shamefull meanness of it all.«

»Don't let us quarrel and say hard things to one another,« she said aloud, almost piteously; »let us speak of something else, and not try to feel cruel to each other.«

»Will you promise me not to try and influence your brother against me?« Miss Vicary asked, eagerly.

»Don't ask me to make such a promise,« Horry pleaded; »it's too humiliating to us both.«

»Has your brother said much to you, or anything to you, about my sister Clarice?«

»Very little.«

»And has that little interested you?«

»Not very much, I am not nearly as much interested in her as Gilbert is.«

»Mrs. Arthur,« Miss Vicary began, solemnly, »if you have any care for yourself, or your children, check your brother's interest in her; crush his curiosity about her, induce him to leave her and her story alone.«

»Why?« Horatia asked, simply.

»Why, oh! it's not easy to give you the reason why, but, believe me, I speak for other people's good, as well as my own. Clarice is very beautiful, and tho' she'll always be mad, she'll always be cunning, too; she might get Gilbert to love her, and then Heaven help us all.«

She spoke the last words with such deep pathetic melancholy that Horatia shuddered.

»I feel inclined to pray that I may never hear your sister Clarice's name again at one moment, and the next I long to see her,« she said.

»You shall see her if you like,« Emmeline said, eagerly. »Come home with me, you shall see her to-day.« And in her own mind Miss Vicary wondered, »Will womanly second-sight tell *her* anything, I wonder?«

CHAPTER XI.

CLARICE'S APPEAL.

»Is she so lovely?« were the first words spoken by Mrs. Arthur Waldron, after a silence that had lasted from the gate of the Bridge House garden until they were well on their way up the Larpington avenue.

»Who?« Emmeline answered absently. Her thoughts had strayed from Clarice during the silence. They had wandered whither the thoughts of a woman in love always will wander—namely, after the man she is in love with.

»Your sister Clarice; my brother spoke of her beauty as being something exceptional.«

Miss Vicary reddened as she listened, and then grew pale with genuine jealous wrath as she replied—

»She has yellow hair and good eyes. I have seen many prettier women than Clarice.«

»Is she at all like you?« Mrs. Arthur Waldron asked.

»My mother thinks she can see a family likeness between us, but I dare say you won't see it,« the girl answered, slowly; »let me caution you if you *do* see any likeness not to mention it before Clarice; she thinks herself, mad as she is, infinitely superior to me. Mr. Carter will think I am as mad

as she is, when he sees me taking another visitor to her to-day.«

»Does she never go out?

»Never,,« Miss Vicary answered, quickly. »Now, don't begin to think that she's kept shut up and deprived of fresh air and exercise out of wanton cruelty; Mr. Carter would take her out in the garden if she would go, but she prefers staying in 'unless she is let go by herself,' she says. Of course we can't allow a mad woman to go roaming about as she pleases, so she has to pay the penalty of her obstinacy, and remain in the house.«

»Poor Clarice! it seems to me it would be a mercy, indeed, if she died,« Horatia said, pityingly.

»It would be a greater mercy than you think for, and to more people than you think of,« Miss Vicary said, gloomily. And by this time they were in the picture-gallery, and fast approaching Clarice's room.

As on the occasion of her having introduced Gilbert Denham to the mysterious chamber, Emmeline rang the bell of the ante-room. But this time it was opened by the nurse. It seemed to be almost a relief to Emmeline to hear that Mr. Carter had gone out.

»Is she drawing or reading, nurse?« Miss Vicary asked.

»Neither, miss; she's asleep, poor soul,« the woman answered, sympathetically. And then she led the way into the room where the sick girl was lying stretched upon a couch, in a deep, pleasant sleep, apparently, for a bright smile kept on playing over her perfect lips.

The two ladies stood looking at her for a few moments, then Horatia spoke.

»She's lovelier than Gilbert's description led me to believe she was, even. In all my dreams of fair women, I never dreamt of anything so fair as this one.«

»Really; well, I can't say I admire yellow-haired women so much myself; they're generally insipid-looking, I think; and for all their mild milk-and-water looks, they've nearly always horrible tempers. It was Clarice's ungovernable passion, when she had her trouble, that broke her mind down.«

»Her trouble was a love-trouble, of course?« Horatia inquired.

»Yes; the man she loved died,« Miss Vicary said the last words with a gulp that sounded like a sob. »Other people have lost lovers in the same way, but she chose to think hers the hardest case in the world.«

»Poor thing! poor girl!« Mrs. Arthur muttered, bending down and touching the tiny white hand that was resting on the back of the sofa. And at the touch, light as it was, Clarice woke, opened her eyes, and with wonderful composure, instantly raised herself into a sitting position.

»You here again,« she began, her violet eyes flashing angrily on Emmeline. »Why have you come and who is——«

She checked herself suddenly, and rose up with all the anger gone from her eyes, and with a look of passionate appeal reigning in its stead.

»You'll know me, you'll know me,« she began, piteously; »you'll know my face as I know yours,

and you'll tell every one who I am, and what the name that I have forgotten is. You'll know me, won't you? You'll free me, won't you? You'll turn these wretches out and tell me where I am, and who I am, won't you?»

She had caught Horatia's hands in her own slight, nervous ones; she had drawn nearer and nearer as she made her wild appeal, and now as she brought it to a conclusion, she flung her arms round Mrs. Arthur's neck, and pressed her soft, white cheek against the young widow's.

»Poor darling, you are a stranger to me,« Horatia said, gently, and as she said it Miss Vicary heaved a sigh of obvious relief, and the mad girl drew back disappointed.

»Yet I know your face as well as I do my own,« she said, dejectedly, »only I can't put a name to it; if I could I could remember my own name, for it's the same I know.«

»You see now what delusions she labours under,« Miss Vicary said, contemptuously. »Her name the same as yours, indeed! poor Clarice!«

As she spoke, Miss Vicary turned away with an irritating laugh, and walked away to the window, where she let herself drift into thoughts of Gilbert. As she stood thus absorbed, Clarice, with the quick cunning of her state, picked up a little water-colour study she had made of her own face, and put it into Horatia's hand, and Horatia, with a sudden and uncontrollable impulse, hid it away in her muff. The incident scarcely occupied a second, and at the end of it Clarice turned away singing. Into her darkened mind this gleam of light had

come—she had succeeded in establishing intercourse with the outer world unknown to her jailers.

By-and-bye, Emmeline tore her thoughts away from Gilbert, and turned them once again towards Gilbert's sister.

»You have seen enough of the enchanted Princess, I suppose, haven't you? Come down and see mamma now; and look here, please don't mention the visit you have paid to this white elephant of ours to mamma, or to Mr. Carter; I oughtn't to have brought you, only I wanted to please you, because you are Gilbert's sister.«

»I won't mention it either to your mamma or to Mr. Carter,« Horatia promised. Then she let herself be hurried away, for she was impatient to study the sketch of the lovely face in solitude.

Clarice had relapsed into her normal state of indifference; but still it seemed to Horatia that the beautiful violet eyes looked steadily and wistfully into her own as she said good-bye, and unquestionably Clarice's hand gave hers a most significant clasp.

»Good-bye, we shall meet again, Clarice,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron said, gently, and Clarice replied,

»We shall, and you'll not call me Clarice then, for you'll know me, you'll know me, you'll know me!«

These last words of Clarice's were ringing in her ears some hours afterwards, when she was sitting at home, before a bright fire, brooding over the events of the last two days. Bessie's death had been a shock to her; but her intercourse with that kindest of creatures had been very limited during the last few years; and so the announce-

ment of her death, though it had been a shock, had not been such a shock as Clarice's urgent, passionate appeal had been this morning.

She sat there turning the subject over and over in her mind, looking at it from every point of view with which she was acquainted, and finding it grow more and more perplexing the more she thought about it.

»I could read in her eyes that she was speaking the truth when she said she knew my face,« Horatia thought, »and yet I never saw her, or any one half as lovely as she is before in my life; who can she be? I would give so much to find out, for, as Gilbert feels, she is not a Vicray.«

Poor Horatia! She little knew what a heavy price she would be called upon to pay for the knowledge she now so ardently and honestly desired. And so her eyes were sweeter and softer than he had ever seen them before, full of genuine womanly compassion and sympathy, when Frank Stapylton came in to call upon her.

They sat in the gray winter twilight for some time, talking of Gilbert, and hoping that the business which had wrenched him away so suddenly would soon permit him to return. And through all the discussion, and the speculations to which it gave rise, in Mr. Stapylton's sympathetic mind, Horatia was loyal to her brother's wishes, and kept the secret of Bessie's death. But the necessity for being on guard grew irksome to her, and she was glad to change the subject.

She did it by speaking of the Larpington House people, and of the suspiciously cautious way in which

they concealed Clarice from the observation of the neighbourhood. »Miss Vicary has broken through her rule of reserve as far as I am concerned to-day,« she explained; »she wishes to please me and to buy my neutrality about my brother; so she took me up there and let me see her sister, and her sister is—but I'll show you.«

She rose up and rang for lights, and when they came she took up the slight water-colour sketch in which Clarice had done something like feeble justice to her own rare loveliness.

»Clarice managed to put this in my hand as a memento,« Horatia said, holding it out to Frank Stapylton. »It is like her, only paint can't give the sheen of her golden hair, or the shimmer of her glorious eyes.«

He took it, looked at it, looked at it for a moment, then rose like a man to meet the blow the revelation was to him.

»This is the girl I told you of; the girl I proposed to at Brighton,« he said.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MARTYRDOM OF HORATIA WALDRON.

FOR a few moments—and the moments were full of such pain and astonishment that in living through them she grew many hours older—Horatia Waldron stood mute and motionless before the man whose mind had travelled back to the past, and whose heart was beating at the sight even of the poor semblance of his lost love.

It cut her to the quick to see that »still the memory rankled,« the memory of that woman whom he had loved in his youth, and who had preferred another man to him. Fidelity is a delightful quality in the eyes of a woman when it is exhibited towards herself. When it is exhibited towards another, she is apt to be blind to the full beauty and excellence of it.

»It can only be a most astonishing likeness, after all,« he said, presently, looking scrutinizingly at the sketch of the fair face that had moved him so strongly. »It can only be one of those marvellous accidental resemblances that one does hear of occasionally; and yet—it's painfully like Cecil Rashleigh, don't you know?«

»No, I don't know—how should I know?« Horatia said, with the fatally visible petulance that is

born of jealousy. The current phrase had not irritated her when falling from Frank Stapylton's lips previously. But now when he foolishly assumed that she possessed a knowledge of a woman she had never seen, she felt irritated, »justly irritated,« she told herself.

»No, to be sure, how should you?« he said, thoughtfully. »And I must be mistaken, of course; but it was a shock to me at first to find that Miss Vicary's mad sister is so uncommonly like the girl I was in love with once. When I took this up and caught the first glimpse of her face, I felt just the same thrill I did years ago when I first saw her, and fell in love with her on the spot. I was awfully cut, to be sure.«

Horatia remained motionless, as motionless as she could—that is to say, a certain trembling of her nervous lips, a certain air of light flutter that cannot be defined, would have betrayed her agitation and its cause to him, if all attention had not been concentrated on the subject of the wonderful resemblance he had discovered between the mad Miss Vicary and his old love.

It was pitiably hard on Horatia Waldron. Only the night before he had been worrying her in words, and with a manner that was even warmer than his words. He had been showing her that she held the highest place in his estimation, the first claim in his interest, the position of honour in his heart. And now he was speaking openly of another woman in terms of love and admiration, and avowing, without hesitation, that he felt thrilled at the sight even of an accidental likeness to that

other one. It was pitiably hard on Mrs. Arthur Waldron; it wronged her pride as well as her heart. And she could not take refuge from the pain of endurance by a course of action that is a natural and usual one with proud and passionately loving women. She could not give him his opportunity with the girl who resembled the one he still preferred to herself. She could not bring him nearer to Clarice, and defy him and every one else to suspect the agony she endured, by aiding him to win the girl, a sight of whom thrilled him. All this she would have done, with all the force and skill, and tact and sympathy with which she was endowed, though she would have done it at the cost of such anguish to herself as love and jealousy only have the power of inflicting. But her hands were tied; she could do none of these things, for Clarice was mad; and though she would have been ready to sacrifice herself, she was not prepared to sacrifice him to such an appalling fate.

At last she recovered her composure sufficiently to enable her to act the bitter part which women are often compelled to play.

»I am so glad to be able to tell you honestly that I think there may be no mistake at all on your side,« she began as warmly and sweetly as if every word she was talking were not deepening the pain in her heart. »My brother has no faith at all in her being Mrs. Waldron's daughter; and from what I saw of her to-day—of her grace and beauty and refinement, I am quite ready to endorse my brother's opinion; she may be the—lady you knew once.«

He shook his head incredulously.

»No, no, it's utterly impossible that Cecil Rashleigh can have fallen into their power in any way,« he said. And then, after a brief pause, he added, »I should like to get a sight of her very much, though I'm positive she isn't Cecil; but the likeness is so startling, I should like to see her.«

»You shall if it can be managed in any way,« Horatia said, with all the cordial sympathy of manner which she had at command. »Listen to me, Mr. Stapylton, I dare not raise your hopes too high—it would be so terrible to have to dash them down again; but if, when you have seen her, you find her to be the one we hope she may be, bear this in mind—that Gilbert is sure, under different treatment, her mind would be quite restored.«

Poor, wretched, honourable impostor that she was! She succeeded perfectly in making him believe that all her interest was engaged on the side of the girl who resembled Cecil. He had no more idea than men usually have in such cases, that Horatia was capable of being horribly cruel to herself, for the sake of doing him what he thought a kindness. She seemed to be doing it all in an effortless manner, and so in this new excitement he forgot his own former warm feelings for her, and assumed easily that her interest in him was of that true sisterly order which it is so creditable »for a fellow to gain from a nice woman.« And Horatia saw that he took this view of the case, and went on acting her part more perfectly than ever.

»I almost feel as if the dream of your youth would be realized,« she said, with the fine fervour

women can portray about the heart affairs of another, when their own hearts are bleeding to death sometimes.

»Well, it won't be the 'dream of my youth' whatever this comes to, you see; the fascinating, all-conquering girl I was so awfully fond of, she won't be the same, don't you know?—she's been married, and——«

»Mad,« Horatia said, impulsively, letting jealous wrath have all its own way for a moment. Then again she constrained herself strongly, to go on making him believe that all this was just as she would have it.

»But the two evils are things of the past, Mr. Stapylton; for all we know she may never have been married at all; and as for the madness, that exists chiefly in the imagination of Mrs. Waldron and Miss Vicary, I am inclined to think. Let me tell you how she looked when she was speaking to me this morning. I am such a poor word-painter that I shall not do her justice, but I will do my best to make you understand how she interested and fascinated me, and you know how difficult I am about women.«

Then she did »do her best,« believing that she would be guilty of some sort of baseness and meanness if she did not depict this unconscious rival of hers in the most glowing colours she could find to use. And she did her best so cleverly that Frank Stapylton believed she felt an actual pleasure in doing it, and rewarded her efforts on his behalf by being touched to absolute emotion by the vision

she conjured up of the pleading, helpless, lovely prisoner of Larpington House.

In blithe ignorance of the fact of the pain Horatia was enduring in listening to these retrospections, he adorned the subject of Cecil Rashleigh with the most ornate speculations. What he might do, and she might do, if she proved to be the she of his boyhood's romance, was a fruitful theme. And almost equally productive of happy, hopeful, amiable wonderment, was the theme of what other people would say and think and feel.

»At any rate through it all I shall be sure to have your sympathy which ever way the wind blows,« he said, heartily, and Horatia smiled and told him, yes, whatever came he might be sure of her being glad if he was glad, and grieved for him if genuine cause of grief arose.

And she brought herself to say all this with unfaltering lips. It was the first bit of self-abnegation which she had to practise with regard to him, as she performed her task as only a woman can who loves a man too well to pain him by letting him see how he is paining her.

But the weary conviction that this was only the beginning of the end—that she would in fact have to go on seeming the thing she was not glad, namely, for that which would be probably a very doubtful blessing to him, and the very reverse of a blessing to her, grew upon and weakened her—weakened her so, that she was at the very worst soon that a woman can be before the man she pines to please—weary and wan looking, and too wistful

about him altogether to have a particle of the power of witching him left in her.

And he was so bitterly oblivious of her—of what had gone before during his brief intercourse with her—of everything in short that did not bear upon his own case in connection with the love he had lost, and the possibilities concerning the lady of Larpington House. So, being thus utterly oblivious, he stayed on, and raked over the ashes of the past, and disinterred every incident relating to those halcyon days of youth and love and hope in which he had known Cecil Rashleigh.

»I shall leave the matter entirely in your hands at first,« he said at length, when he had exhausted his reminiscences of Cecil, and poor Horatia's tired eyes were rapidly losing the power of expressing that sparkling interest which she wished him to believe she felt in the affair. »I shall leave the matter entirely in your hands at first; you manage to let me have a sight of the girl herself, and after that I'll undertake to clear up any mystery there may be.« Then he added something about Horatia being the sweetest fellow-labourer a man could have in any work, and went away, finally, beaming with excited self-satisfaction.

On the face of it his conduct may appear thoughtless and selfish to those who are not given to scanning human actions closely, and analysing human motives thoroughly. But the fact is that he was only selfish and thoughtless to the same degree that the noblest natured as well as the meanest natured men are when the master passion seizes them. Only the other day he had been charmed

fascinated, interested by Mrs. Arthur Waldron to the point of wishing to make her fall in love with him, and become exclusively his own property in which no other man should have the right to take pride and pleasure. But he had not been interested by her yet to the point of falling in love with her himself. Accordingly he almost unconsciously slipped off his former hopes and sensations about her, as easily as he would have slipped off a cloak, when the chord was struck of a sentiment that had been stronger in the past, than was his sentiment for her in the present. It was all natural and right and pardonable enough, above all it was essentially human, and Horatia Waldron acknowledged that it was all these things. Nevertheless it was uncommonly hard to bear.

In almost a similar way to this these people passed the next few days, meeting often, meeting always in healthy open undisguised friendship, and still the meetings were full of pleasure unalloyed to the man who loved to talk of Cecil, and liked to have clever and sympathetic Mrs. Arthur Waldron for a listener—full of unalloyed pleasure to him, and full of such pain to her, as can only be appreciated by a woman who has been gnawed by jealousy, and at the same time torn to tatters by the struggles of a self-respect, that will not permit the jealousy to manifest itself.

Sometimes Horatia felt wildly anxious to accelerate matters, as one about whose heart the dagger's point was playing might feel anxious to drive it home to the hilt. If she could have fought for and won his bride for him on these occasions she

would have done it, and additionally would have been capable of mounting the carriage box and driving the happy pair at full gallop to the nearest church. There would have been absolute relief to her in this heart-suicidal course of action. But to sit and be the recipient of Frank's love rhapsodies about another woman! Well, she won her martyr's crown nobly, that is all that can be said.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MESSAGE!

MEANWHILE Gilbert Denham buried the wife whose life he had counted on as being of such value to him when the time was ripe for Miss Vicary to demand her pound of flesh, and then suffered himself to be dragged back to Larpington by the irresistible power of repulsion. During his absence he found that he had been very securely assigned by rumour to Miss Vicary. Her mother had given Mrs. Arthur Waldron's unwilling hand an emphatic squeeze when they met on the Sunday previously, in coming out of church. »And that woman actually had the audacity to add that she heartily and cordially approved of the arrangements, and that when you married her daughter, she would retire and leave you in possession of Larpington House. As if your interest was to be bought away from my boy in that way; or as if I was to be won to sink his rights because it may be that my own brother will enjoy them.«

Horatia panted out her protestation eagerly, and Gilbert replied to it in a way that re-assured her.

»Rely upon it, that no power on earth, or under it either for that matter, shall ever induce me to marry Miss Vicary,« he said, in a tone of gloomy

desperation; »but there will be some sharp and severe passages before I gain my point and get free from her.«

»You mean before you gain the secret whatever it may be about Clarice?«

»Yes; the secret whatever it may be about Clarice is the greatest interest I have on earth—now.«

The »now« was an afterthought added by the poor young widower, as a respectful tribute to the memory of his deceased wife.

»Well, Gilbert,« his sister began, hesitatingly, with a woman's natural unwillingness to point out to another that the love which she had been accredited with gaining was in reality given to somebody else. »Well, Gilbert, since you went away something very extraordinary has happened,« and then she went on to tell him of her visit to Clarice, of the water-colour sketch, and all its consequences.

And as she told him she saw that another complication would arise. For she saw her brother's face darken and flush ominously, and she noticed that his voice had a strange, harsh ring in it as he said,

»I don't want any aid from Stapylton,« and there was about him that air of gruff rejection of anything that might be construed into a service or favour, from a man who might develop into a rival, which is so unmistakable. »He is going to love her, too, and be jealous of Frank,« the poor young widow thought, and then her jealousy for her son—for the son who might live to be a talented

and distinguished man, and so glorify her (his mother) in a way that no new lover could ever do—entered in and for the time cast out the jealousy of the mysterious Cecil, with whom Frank Stapylton fancied himself in love.

That her boy might be worsted in this struggle—that her little Gerald's interests might be swamped in this general flood of feeling which seemed to be setting in—was a possibility that strung her up to the point of enduring anything. She was very ready to sacrifice herself. A woman who is worth anything is always ready to do that, but she was not ready to sacrifice her child—her boy—the son of whom she was so proud in his babyhood, that to live to be his mother in his manhood was her most fervent prayer.

Under the influence of this feeling she spoke to her brother with all the convincing warmth that characterises a woman who is in loving earnest.

»But Gilbert why not take his aid, if he can give you any? take his aid in clearing away the mists which are between my boy and his own, and give him your help in winning this woman to be his wife; help each other. Do! do! for my sake.«

And Gilbert looked at her, pulling his moustache the while, in vague endeavour to comprehend her, and didn't understand her in the least, and was indeed rather further from her real meaning when the conversation ended than he had been at the beginning of it.

»Of course, if you're so set on his marrying this girl, whether he wants to do so or not, you'll carry your point by the force of sheer pertinacity;

you quietly impulsive women are apt to get your way. But I thought that the wind was blowing quite another way; really, Horry, I thought the other night——«

»Oh! don't tell me what you thought the other night,« she interrupted. »You were mistaken, and I ought to be very thankful that I have not been led into temptation, and at the same time I ought to bless this vision of Cecil Rashleigh's face, for through it we may find out something about the way that woman got hold of my boy's property.«

»I don't see that you ought to be very thankful for either circumstance, Horry,« her brother said, laughing; »and I'm sure you are not either; you're trying to delude yourself, my dear girl; I shall think Stapylton a sentimental fool if he falls off from his preference for you; there's something maudlin about a fellow getting spooney on an idea in this way that I don't like. I believe you, in the zeal of your desire to sacrifice yourself, have been talking him into it.«

Mrs. Arthur Waldron shook her head, and answered with just a tinge of jealous bitterness in her tone.

»No, no; there was no need for me to do that, I assure you, Gilbert; it was genuine emotion—the emotion produced by genuine love—which he betrayed on seeing that poor faint sketch of a face that I feel to be fair enough to chain any man's constancy for life. I wish you wouldn't laugh doubtfully in that way. I want you to believe that Frank Stapylton will have my hearty aid and warmest wishes.«

»By Jove, then, he won't have mine,« Gilbert Denham cried, hastily, and fellow-feeling taught his sister truly that he, too, was being stung much in the same way that she herself was. The fair face had evidently made an indelible impression on him.

For a few moments, Horatia Waldron allowed hope to thrill her heart as the thought flashed into her mind that Gilbert would attempt to rival Frank Stapylton. Why should not her handsome, clever brother rival him successfully? There was balm in the thought. Then, with the absurd partiality of a woman in love, she let the hope fade away, as she said to herself,

»But what chance would Gilbert stand against Frank? She refused him in his youth, because she was bound to some one else; but what free woman could resist him now? Well! I have my children.«

»I have my children.« The cry wells up from many a bleeding heart, and the reflection saves many a woman from utter despair. »I have my children!« It is a merciful dispensation that the majority do not think at the same time, »But they will soon grow away from finding their mother their nearest, dearest interest; they will each and all of them learn to love some stranger better than me; and it is right that it should be so; right! but, Heaven, how hard!«

Happily for Horatia no thought of the husband and wife of the future who would come and take her children from her disturbed her peace now. She had them still—entirely, undisputably; and

having them she told herself she could see Frank Stapylton lapse from her without a sigh.

»I suppose you have that water-colour sketch you were speaking of? I should like to have a look at it,« Gilbert said, in a tone of transparently-assumed carelessness, presently.

»No, I haven't, Gilbert; I lent it to Mr. Stapylton,« and then Horatia went on heroically to describe how Mr. Stapylton had pleaded ardently for the poor, weak reflection of the beauty he adored.

»I consider it mere maudlin sentimentality—a fellow going on in that way,« Gilbert said angrily; »parading his puny constancy to a woman who refused him once as if it was something to be proud of; Stapylton hasn't half the stuff in him that I thought he had.«

»It's because he is showing that he has such good faithful stuff in him that you're annoyed, Gilbert,« she said, warmly. Horatia Waldron suffered terribly in her own heart on account of that same faithfulness of Frank's. But she would not hear him censured for it without uttering her protest.

But she saw how it was with painful perspicuity. Both these men—the two dearest to her on earth—had gone over to the side of the unconscious woman whom ordinarily just Horatia Waldron had come to regard as her enemy; and she felt piteously pained and outraged and helpless.

The avenger in the person of Emmeline Vicary was upon Gilbert Denham before he had recovered the blow of hearing that Frank Stapylton was

going to put in a prior claim to the beauty whose indentivity was shrouded in mystery. Miss Vicary came down in all her glory upon the inhabitants of the Bridge House; came down with a chariot and horses, and a determined-looking mother, and raiment of price upon her fine expansive person. And she called Gilbert »Gilbert,« in the tones of an owner, and generally by means of her manner made both Gilbert and his sister hate her more than they had done hitherto.

In explanation of a certain abstraction of mind and indifference of manner, which he could not help himself from exhibiting, and which Miss Vicary, with ponderous warmth, promptly resented, Gilbert suffered the statement to escape him that he had just lost by death the dearest friend he had in the world. And forthwith Emmeline perplexed him with inquiries.

»Tell me about him, Gilbert,« she said, laying a suspicious emphasis on the personal pronoun; »you will find that I shall never be jealous of your men friends occupying a warm place in your regard; I think it's mean of a woman to be that, don't you?«

»I find that women are capable of any amount of meanness,« he answered, writhing. In the present distorted state of his judgment he almost believed that there was a touch of meanness in the fact of that fair-faced beauty up at Larpington House having existed previously for any other man. And he was almost inclined to accuse poor Horatia of meanness in being ready to aid and abet that other man to win her (the fair-faced beauty). He was

altogether out of gear in fact, and so Miss Vicary had him very much at her tender mercy.

»You will acknowledge that I have not shown anything like meanness in the management of our affairs,« she said, deprecatingly, »in spite of your leaving me so abruptly, after all, you know. I was very brave, for I told mamma and your sister about it myself. Mamma was all that was kind, but (you mustn't be angry with me for telling you the truth now and at all times, Gilbert) your sister showed very ill-feeling about it.«

She had got him out in the most secluded part of Horatia's garden as she made this communication, and she was leaning weightily on his arm in the ponderously affectionate way in which some young women do delight in making manifest their right supreme to the situation. He could bear many things, when the many things were merely means towards an end that was dear to him. But he could not bear censure of his sister from Emmeline Vicary.

»My sister was naturally shocked and surprised at what you said to her,« he said coldly.

»Why 'naturally'?« Miss Vicary asked angrily. »There is nothing so very out-of-the-way in your thinking me good enough to be your wife; your marriage with me won't lower you, or her either, and it strikes me that's all she cares for—«

»Don't speak of marriage, I've just left a death-bed,« Gilbert interrupted, with an amount of emotion that under the circumstances must have been perplexing and offensive to the lady by his side. However, she subdued any evidence of anger

which she might have been tempted to show, and said, almost humbly, »I hope you won't be annoyed at one other thing I've done during your absence; I have taken Mrs. Arthur to see Clarice?«

»No, I'm not annoyed at it,« he said, and yet he was unaccountably annoyed about it the whole time. »Perhaps,« he went on, »it would have been well to have consulted me first; my sister is enthusiastic, and enthusiasm is very penetrating; if there is anything to be discovered about Clarice which you wish to keep concealed you have done an unwise thing.«

»I shall make you the judge of whether it will be well for us to conceal it or not, very soon,« she said in a whisper. »I'll trust you entirely—as I love you; you shall know Clarice's story.«

He felt that an appalling responsibility of some unknown kind would be cast upon him as soon as he did know it. Nevertheless he panted to hear all she had to tell him.

»The sooner the better for us all,« he said quietly, and Emmeline nerved herself to the task, and would have told him »all« there was to tell, if her mother and his sister had not come to the window calling them just then.

»Mr. Stapylton is here, and Mrs. Waldron wishes us all to go up and have luncheon with her,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron said to her brother as he approached her, »and I should like to go if you will, Gilbert.« She went on driving the dagger deeper into her heart as she thought of how Frank would not only »thrill,« but tell her of his thrills

when he found himself under the same roof with the woman he loved.

And Gilbert acquiesced in the plan, for anything was better than delay, and so as soon as it was settled, Miss Vicary proposed that the carriage should be sent home, and that the whole party should walk up together.

So they went through the village a peaceful procession apparently, full of all manner of kindly feeling and goodwill towards one another. And so many of their fellow-creatures as observed them thought what an auspicious spectacle it was, and how well it augured for the future prosperity of the place that the two branches of the family should be proclaiming in this way their intention of dwelling in peace and amity together.

The luncheon was a lengthy ceremony at Larpington House always, but to-day it seemed hideous in its extreme length to the two men who were anxious to see it come to an end, and to be on their way to fresh discoveries. They grew silent, sad, utterly uninteresting in their bored impatience, and it was a relief even to unconscious Mrs. Waldron when it came to an end, and Emmeline moved an adjournment to the picture gallery. »For there without making ourselves conspicuous we can talk apart,« she whispered to Gilbert Denham. And he knowing that the picture gallery opened into Clarice's room said »Yes« to her proposition gladly.

They sauntered up and down for a time looking at the dead and gone Waldrons, and talking of the extreme beauty which had characterized the

last two representatives of the race; and Frank Stapylton made himself Mrs. Arthur Waldron's close escort during the sauntering, and whispered to her perpetually, for did she not know of his secret, and sympathise with it? Gilbert Denham and Emmeline meantime strolling apart, he anxious beyond the bounds of mere common anxiety for the moment to arrive which should put him in possession of Clarice's story; she striving with all her power to string herself up to the task of telling it.

Presently the mistress of the house, seeing that the quartette had arranged itself so happily, and feeling that as the odd one she was *de trop*, left them, and went back to one of the back saloons wherein she loved to sit, while her imagination peopled it with an aristocratic crowd whom she had had the power of calling together.

So the four were left alone, without her guarding presence, within a few yards of the secret, which three of them thirsted to find out. Wildly, impatiently, without an end or aim, Horatia Waldron moved about the gallery, and spoke as coherently as she could of the things which she scarcely saw. Tried to talk Art, poor thing! with her heart aching about Nature, and failed; and still concealed her failure from the man who caused her to make it.

That he was not worth one of these pangs which she suffered on his account was a saving consideration which never came to her aid once during these dark days. It never does until a woman has endured all the anguish, and then it

comes with overwhelming force, and adds terribly to her mortification. On the whole, better the agony of loving than the discovery that the one loved is not worth the price of pain one has paid for him.

But Horatia Waldron had not made this discovery yet. Most probably she was one of the women who never do make it, but who go on to the end making gods of mere idols of some kind of poor composition. If she is one of these women, all I can say is that hers will be the happier fate. The feeling of having been deceived by one's own vain imaginings is about as painful a one as a woman can be called upon to live through.

Frank Stapylton was one of the men whom women truthfully enough speak of as delightful, and men warmly mention as a »very good fellow.« Nevertheless he was not that despicable thing »a general favourite.« Far be it from me to wish to depreciate the man Horatia Waldron honoured with her regard. He was not a general favourite, but he was very well liked, with very good reason, by the great majority. Since the fading away of his first love dream, he had taken life very gaily. His real inner cry had been—

»Then let me live a long romance,
And learn to trifle well,
And write my motto '*Vive la danse!*'
And '*Vive la bagatelle!*'«

But Horatia Waldron had fetched him down from this airy unfeeling sphere. Fetched him down only that he might fall in love with another woman.

Into the midst of their quiet in this picture

gallery, this latter reflection would intrude and disquiet her. She knew all the time that he was waiting, longing, yearning for a sound and a sight of that other woman as ardently as he was shrinking from it. And so presently she said, with the impassioned fervour of despairing love and defiant jealousy,

»If 'Will' had anything to do with the matter I'd bring Clarice into our midst this moment. It is hard on us all—it is more than cruel to you, that circumstances should keep her boxed up so close to us when a sight of her might—«

Into the midst of her speech came a strain, and the cry of the recognition of it. Out from the barred and bolted chamber in which Clarice was imprisoned there rang the words of Blumenthal's »Message,«—the first words of the witching melody, sung in a high tremulous soprano, and in response to it, Frank Stapylton stammered out,

»It is Cecil herself.«

CHAPTER XIV.

»IN MY LADY'S CHAMBER.«

HE did not soften or subdue his voice, he gave out his conviction that it was »Cecil herself,« gladly, loudly, gloriously as a man should give out any conviction he may hold about the woman he loves.

»Let us go in at once,« he said eagerly to Horatia Waldron, turning to her for sure and ready sympathy and hearty acquiescence, and utterly ignoring Miss Vicary's presence and possible power. And his hand was on the handle of the door of Clarice's prison in a moment and the flush of love and anticipation was on his face, and Mrs. Arthur Waldron felt that the hour had come for another to »shine her down« altogether, as far as he was concerned, when suddenly Miss Vicary interposed.

Coldly, mockingly, tauntingly, it almost seemed to them all, Emmeline spoke.

»Really, Mr. Stapylton, it seems to me that weakness is infectious; that is the only way I can account for your taking such an unpardonable liberty as to attempt to enter that room.«

»But I tell you that I know her; that I will see her,« he cried excitedly, and then, lashed to fury by the fear that the secret she was going to surrender for love, to barter for love, would be discovered, and so make her surrender of no avail,

she ran to the head of the staircase and called loudly for »Mr. Carter.«

»Why on earth were you so impetuous, so ridiculously fast about it,« Gilbert Denham said, complainingly. »How could it have entered your mind for one moment that the door would be unlocked? You have done away with all chance of seeing her now.«

And indeed it seemed as if Frank Stapylton had damaged an excellent cause when Mr. Carter appeared, in answer to Emmeline's loud appeals, and with surly determination refused to »permit his patient to be made the object of idle curiosity.«

It was in vain that Frank, with perfect ingenuousness and utter want of wisdom, protested with fervour that his curiosity was the very reverse of idle, that he had recognised the voice of the friend who was the dearest in the world to him, and that one glance at her face would enable him to proclaim whether or not a foul fraud had been perpetrated. It was all in vain. Mr. Carter denied the possibility of the suspected identity, and declared that he was endowed with power to protect his patient from intrusion, by the authority of her mother. And Emmeline Vicary backed him up in his decision, in defiant disregard of all the reminding, appealing glances Gilbert Denham levelled at her.

»You must be as mad as my patient to have been guilty of such an error of judgment—such a breach of good taste in the house of a friend and neighbour,« Mr. Carter presently muttered to the bewildered, enthusiastic, excited man, who was powerless to do more than repeat his firm and

unalterable conviction that it was »Cecil herself« whose voice he had heard.

It was humiliating, mortifying disappointing to a degree to them all, to have to leave the mystery fast, as they thought they were on the brink of elucidating it. It was doubly hard on Frank, who had a decent feeling of interest in the affair, as it concerned Mrs. Arthur Waldron's child, and a desperate one as it concerned Cecil Rashleigh. And it was almost equally hard on Horatia, who had so many interests at stake in the matter.

They left the house very soon, parting with Mrs. Waldron and Miss Vicary with marked coolness, and, on Frank Stapylton's part, with undisguised suspicion. »You have stopped me from seeing her this time,« he said hotly to Miss Vicary, »but your triumph will be a very brief one, I can assure you.«

And in answer to this last indiscretion, Miss Vicary said, »I defy you ever to see my sister.«

Gilbert's farewell speech was far less threatening to listen to at the time, but in thinking it over afterwards both the mother and daughter came to the conclusion that it was far more ominous.

»Every secret unfolds itself in time; everything comes to the man who can wait; I can wait, you will find.«

»He may wait for ever, and it shall never come to him, shall it, Emmy?« Mrs. Waldron began violently. »Say you'll never let him wheedle you out of it, Emmy? All that I have done, I have done for you, my child.«

»Nonsense, mother; it has been for yourself

quite as much as for me, and why shouldn't it be for yourself? It is natural and human to do as much for oneself as for one's children, and I never should try to deny anything that is natural and human.«

»Ah! you're not a mother, and can't understand a mother's feelings,« Mrs. Waldron resumed plaintively. »Do you think I would have planned, and toiled, and schemed as I have for myself alone?«

»Yes,« Emmeline answered promptly, »why shouldn't you? you're as fond of fine living and fine clothes as I am, and why shouldn't you be? You wouldn't like to go back to what you were before I took service with her, any more than I should like it.«

»It's what I shall have to do and you will have to do if you let him wheedle you out of the truth.«

»If he ever does wheedle the truth out of me it will be his interest as much as ours to hold his tongue; the truth won't benefit his sister, if it would he'd sacrifice me, I believe, but it won't and so his honourable scruples may be lulled to rest, I dare say,« Emmy replied, half contemptuously, for she was feeling bitter against Gilbert for the coldness he had shown to her this morning, and in her bitterness she let the truth, which is the most mortifying of all for a woman to realize, escape her—namely, the conviction that she was after all only a secondary consideration to the man she loved.

But suggestive as this conversation would have been to any one of the disappointed trio, their conversation was still more pregnant with mean-

ing, as they sat until the twilight fell in the drawing-room of the Bridge House discussing ways and means and possibilities. Gilbert, the practical, declared his intention of getting a detective down from London, while Stapylton, the ardent, made life pleasant for Mrs. Arthur Waldron by avowing that he did not need the services of a detective, and would infinitely prefer breaking Cecil's prison bars himself and carrying her off to some place where Love, aided by Science, should restore reason.

His own assertion, unpremeditated and unthought of as it was, worked in his mind, and caused him to devise and plot and plan as he had never done in his life before. But after all, plotting and planning were of no avail. The scheme he eventually carried out flashed into his mind in an instant, as he rode away from the Bridge House that night.

There were but few lights to be seen in the windows of Larpington House. It looked unusually dull, in fact, for the mistress of the mansion and her daughter, exhausted by the fear and excitement of the day, had gone to bed early, so the usual blaze had not been made in the big saloon and picture-gallery. It all looked quiet and at rest, and a sudden impulse prompted Frank Stapylton to go up and see what the place looked like by moonlight.

He tied his horse to a tree in the avenue and walked up to the house, and stood still for a minute or two, wondering which was the window of the room wherein his love was caged.

It seemed to him as he stood there that there never was a house with so many windows in it as this one, and that there never was a house in which it was more difficult to determine from the outside the where-about of a single room. It was in vain at first that he tried to remember on which part of the terrace the picture-gallery windows opened. It was in vain (at first) that he strove to remember at which end of the picture-gallery Cecil's room was situated. But presently memory and his vision cleared, and with an instinct that was afterwards proved to be unerring, he made way straight to a spot that was immediately under the window of her ante-room.

It was still comparatively early, only about eleven o'clock, but deep peace reigned over this portion of the house. The only sound he heard, as he waited here on this clear winter night, was the shivering sigh of the wind as it passed through the leaves of a mighty magnolia-tree which was trained up against the wall.

Its branches separated at her window, met again at the top, and shot up even higher over the house, stout, strong branches fully equal to bearing the weight of a man. As the belief that they would do so dawned upon him, he acted upon it, and without pausing to consider what he would do when he got to it, he began ascending this natural ladder to Clarice's window.

The boughs bent and gave, but were tough and did not break, and presently he was up with his face on a level with the glass, and a spasm of joy almost made him exclaim aloud as he discovered there were

no shutters. Heavy curtains concealed the room from him, but there were no shutters.

His position on the bough of the sturdy shrub was a secure one. He was able to take time before deciding on his next move, and the first thing he did was to take a solemn oath that he would not go back until he had discovered all there was to discover in the room, between which and himself only a frail pane of glass interposed. To smash it would be to make a noise, to attract the attention of numbers who would overpower him, and get himself kicked out. To try to lift the sash would be mere folly, for it was securely hasped. Not being addicted to burglarious exploits, he was unprovided with the proper tools. But—happy thought—he had a diamond ring.

To take it off and draw it sharply along the side of a pane was the work of a moment, and though the sound set his teeth on edge, he knew that it was not sufficiently loud to rouse a drowsy nurse. He took confidence from his cause also, and from a loving recollection of the law of chances, and went on making sharp clean cuts—waiting a short time between each one to find out if he had aroused attention—until the pane fell out into his hand, and he was enabled to undo the fastening of the window.

It all went in a smooth groove, fortunately, and so he raised the sash noiselessly, and slipped into the room that was not divided by bars and bolts from the love of his life and the mystery of Larpington House.

It was a perilous position, and what was he to gain by it? Unquestionably, he had violated

every social and legal obligation by breaking into his neighbour's house in the way he had at such an hour of the night. Nevertheless, the cause justified him, he felt; and so he looked round for a hiding-place wherein he might bide events until the morning.

Presently he found a spacious closet before the door of which a curtain fell. It was hung with dresses, and cloaks, and shawls, and of these he made a sufficiently comfortable couch, on which he rested himself until day broke, and Clarice's voice roused him.

He had been asleep, sound asleep, to his own great surprise, but a clear remembrance of all the circumstances by which he was surrounded was upon him instantly. He recollected his poor horse in the avenue with a pang, and his love for Cecil and her vicinity with a throb of pleasure that was dashed with—pain for simultaneously also he remembered her marriage and her madness.

Time passed, and by-and-bye he knew that she must be nearly dressed, for he heard the nurse come into the ante-room, and then call back to her charge to know what dress she would wear that morning, and he felt that instantly the door of the closet where the dresses were lying would be opened, and he would be discovered.

»I shall be sorry to hurt the woman,« he said to himself, »but some way or other I must silence her at once, before she has time to sound the alarm and spoil my game.«

And as he thought this the closet door opened, and the nurse saw him.

CHAPTER XV.

EMMY'S CONFESSION.

THE nurse opened the door, and looked at him, and her look of ghastly awe drove him into instant action. In another moment he knew that she would either scream or gurgle herself off into loud-sounding hysterics. It was essential to his interests that she should do neither the one nor the other. His manly instinct taught him that if he were melodramatic, so would she be; whereas if he exhibited self-possession, she would find the manner infectious, and exhibit it also. Accordingly, in a low, perfectly composed voice, he said,

»I'm a friend of Mrs. Waldron's. You needn't be alarmed.«

He looked so utterly unlike a burglar, so utterly unlike any human machine that could be charged with bad intentions, that the nurse, in spite of the suspicious nature of his position, was re-assured to the point of preserving strict silence, which was all he wanted of her. Having rewarded her for her self-command with a sovereign, he stepped out into the room, telling her his name at the same time, and promising her that whatever was the end of this exploit of his, he would take care that she should be well rewarded and held guiltless.

»Directly she is dressed, let me walk into her room without a word of introduction from you, and if the result of my sudden appearance has the effect I anticipate, we'll have her out of this house before another hour is over our heads,« he whispered; and the nurse mutely indicated that she would obey him.

The few minutes that he passed between giving this information and its being obeyed, were minutes of the wildest anxiety. Supposing, he told himself over and over again, that he should have been misled by a fancied resemblance only between the sketch and the voice of this Clarice to the Cecil of his youth. Well, the only thing for him now to do was to go at it straight, and either bear her off, or bear like a man the disappointment of its not being her. Just as he came to this conclusion, the nurse opened the door, and softly beckoned him into the room in which Gilbert had been ushered by Emmeline Vicary; and in another moment his doubts were solved, and he found himself once more with her who had been Cecil Rashleigh.

Her recognition of him was as instantaneous, as thorough, as unfeignedly joyful as his was of her. In answer to his cry of »Cecil?« she came swiftly to him with outstretched hands, with almost inarticulate words of joy and surprise, with a face all aglow with hope and pleasure. As he caught the hands and bent over them, kissing them tenderly, she said,

»You'll know my name, won't you? You'll tell them that I am Cecil——«

»Rashleigh,« he said, as she paused. But she shook her head in weary disappointment, and told him,

»I was Cecil Rashleigh when I knew you—oh, so long ago, but——«

»You have married since, and had another name, which I have never known,« he said, half-bitterly.

»And it's gone from me, as Cecil Rashleigh had, and as yours has. What are you called?« she added, abruptly; and a light of fuller and more perfect recognition flashed over her face, as he replied,

»Frank Stapylton.«

»Put on her shawl and bonnet, or something,« he said, hurriedly, to the nurse. »She is not the person they pretend she is. She is not Mrs. Waldron's——«

His words were arrested by a cry from Cecil that seemed to leap out joyfully from her heart.

»Waldron is the name I had forgotten!« she rang out thrillingly. »I am Cecil Waldron now, Frank; and you'll tell all the world that I am, won't you?«

He realised the truth in an instant then. The girl he loved had married his old friend, George Waldron, and they had neither of them liked to hurt his (Frank's) feelings by telling him of the fact. She had married George Waldron! She was the woman of whom George Waldron had written as the fair-faced angel of his life! She was the genuine owner of Larpington House, and the woman who passed as Mrs. Waldron was an impostor.

»I shall get you out of this place at once,« he

hurriedly explained. »I shall take you to the house of the dearest friend I have in the world«—he meant Horatia,—«until you can prove your right to come back here as the mistress of the place.»

»The mistress of this place?« she asked, vaguely, and he told her,

»Yes; the mistress of Larpington House.«

»Ah! he used to talk of Larpington House,« she said, sadly, with the tears welling from her eyes. »And I'm here, am I?«

»Yes; but you shall not be here a minute longer as a prisoner,« Frank said, valiantly, trying to think out and devise a means of evading all the difficulties that would bar their egress as he spoke; for he had resolved upon playing the part of a Lochinvar to the extent of bearing her away at once upon the good steed that was waiting for him in the avenue. »You shall not be here a minute longer,« he was repeating with fervour, and a nervous feeling that he must needs say something to fill up the time which the nurse was wasting in looking for a warm cloak, when a heavy hand was placed on his shoulder, and he found himself twisted round face to face with Mr. Carter.

»I am come just in time, it seems,« that gentleman observed, coolly.

»Not in time,« Frank said, hotly; »for I have found out all you have been lying and scheming to conceal. I have found out that this lady is George Waldron's widow, and that you are a gang of impostors.«

Mr. Carter laughed. »Poor Clarice!« he said, in insulting tones, that made Frank Stapylton's blood

boil. »Poor Clarice! It is not often that a girl who goes mad for love of her mother's husband finds another man ready and willing to take up the cudgels in her defence. Come quietly away with me now, Mr. Stapylton, and we'll have a talk over the matter, and at the end of it you'll find how completely you have been deceived by a fair face and a false tongue.«

Frank Stapylton was as heartily averse to anything like a compromising policy as any man could be. But he felt his inability to pursue any other. Indisputably Mr. Carter had the power to turn him not only out of the room, but out of the house, for every servant in it would have sided with the mad doctor, not out of love but out of fear. Accordingly, after a whispered assurance to Cecil that he would be with her again soon, backed by a power that should free her, Frank followed Carter, and had a conversation which need not be recorded, since it was (and was felt to be by Frank) merely a neatly-linked-together chain of lies. However, he felt it to be necessary to lull to rest the suspicions Mr. Carter evidently felt, in spite of his well-assumed cool indifference, and finally went out of the house, admitting the possibility of its being merely a case of mistaken identity.

As soon as he was clear of Larpington House grounds (he found that his horse had been carefully stabled), he craved for the sympathy in his discovery and consequent joy which only a woman could accord to him, and so rode back with all speed to the Bridge House. It was a relief to him to find

that Gilbert Denham had gone out, and that Horatia was alone. Instinctively he felt that the sister's co-operation would be heartier than the brother's.

»I can tell my tale better if we go out and walk up and down in the garden,« he said, in his restlessness. And so they went out, and she listened to the succinctly-told first portion of his adventure, with tender womanly interest that strenuously kept under any sign of wounded or selfishly jealous feeling. But when he announced the fact of his conviction that Cecil Rashleigh, his early love, was now Cecil Waldron, widow of George Waldron, and rightful owner of the estates that Horatia had always regarded as little Gerald's, the intensity of the motherly feeling asserted itself, and she spoke cruelly,

»Marry her, marry her, and be happy; and Heaven bless your happiness! But, for mercy's sake, don't put her in the way of my boy's interests; don't conjure up imaginary rights for her—rights that have no existence save in her mad brain. Mr. Stapylton, *don't*, by your conduct to my son, turn me, his mother, and your warmest friend, into your hottest enemy.«

»But I believe so firmly in what, I'm suggesting to you,« he said, simply, in his utter amazement. »I believe that she is George Waldron's widow, and if she is——«

»If she is! Oh, my boy, my boy, you'll never get your own; for she hasn't even reason to urge her to restore it to you!« Horatia broke out, bitterly.

»Mr. Stapylton, I have one favour to ask of you. Before you tell any one, even my brother, of your

fancied discovery, give me a day or two to think in—give me a little time to get reconciled to the position. My poor little boy! Why couldn't you have found your fate in her, without making a romance about her which threatens the destruction of his fortunes?»

»Because the romance is a reality,« he answered, sadly enough. »If I could see her herself again, and marry her, and take her away, I'd let Larpington House, and all belonging to it, go to your boy, or to any one else, gladly enough. But I can't; it wouldn't be just, don't you see?«

He spoke heartily, sympathetically, truthfully; and she was a woman to respond heartily to any one of these three things.

»No, it wouldn't be just, and it would only be generous to my boy in a way he must resent when he grows up to be the honourable man he must be. Tell my brother—tell the whole world at once, Frank.«

»And always remember that I told you first of all,« he interrupted, gratefully. »I don't know how it is, but I think of you and turn to you before any one else. I never made such a friend of any one before, never!«

»It's because of Arthur,« she attempted to explain.

»No. I don't think that my friendship for Arthur has anything at all to do with the much warmer friendship I have for you; it's sympathy, nothing else can account for it. I think of you, and want to tell you everything that occurs to me, and nearly

every thought I have; you'll always be my first friend, won't you, Mrs. Arthur?»

It was rather hard on her this appeal, for she loved the man who made it, and he only wanted her friendship. But she was a woman who could only answer such an appeal graciously and gracefully.

»I will always be your firm friend, Frank; your first friend must be your wife; no woman can submit to the idea of her husband taking his confidences to any other woman than herself.«

»I suppose you're right,« he answered, thoughtfully; »but I haven't thought of Cecil as anything but the girl I loved, you see; I don't think of talking to her as I do to you.«

Horatia was strongly tempted to say, »If you did she couldn't understand you,« but she checked the impulse and said—

»The desire to talk to her and her only will come quickly enough, I suspect. How bewildering it is to think of the one I have only heard of as Clarice, as George Waldron's widow.«

»Yes, and how strange it is that the widows of the two fellows I liked best in the world, should be the women who are the dearest to me; you'll forgive me for saying that you are dear to me, Mrs. Waldron, for you are as dear as a sister.«

All this was very gratifying and complimentary, but really poor Horatia may be forgiven for feeling that she had had enough of it. Platonic affection is a very beautiful thing in itself, but when it is proffered in the place of the love a woman is yearning for, its beauty seems of a pale and tame

order. It was an absolute relief to Horatia Waldron now to see her brother come in. His presence she knew would be a check on those ardent protestations of friendship which Frank was so lavishly pouring out.

»Now tell Gilbert at once,« she said. »You'll tell the story better without my presence, perhaps; so I'll leave you.« And then she left the two men alone, and Gilbert Denham learnt that Frank had been beforehand in the matter of clearing up the mystery about Clarice.

They soon arranged their plan of action. Mr. Stapylton, as a magistrate, had the power to demand that the person of a lady who was kept in confinement under false pretences, should be rendered up to her nearest friends. Mrs. Arthur Waldron was her nearest friend. Accordingly, accompanied by two constables, they went up to Larpington House, and in the name of the law carried off the lady who had been known there as Clarice.

They took her back to the Bridge House for a few days until Larpington House could be cleared of the impostors, and the mystery about the impostors cleared up. And there was little difficulty about doing this latter thing, for now that the chances of securing Gilbert Denham were fading away, Emmeline Vicary told the whole story.

»There is only one thing I ask of you,« she said, as she and her mother came into the room in which Mrs. Arthur Waldron, Frank Stapylton, and Gilbert Denham sat awaiting the explanation, »and that is that if I tell you all there is to be told, you will let us get away—you won't pro-

secute us; if you do, it will do you no good, and it will make us worse women than we are already.»

She commenced speaking in a hard, sulky tone, but as she wound up her appeal her voice shook, and the tears came into her eyes. It was the softest mood into which she had ever been betrayed, and she was betrayed into it by love. She knew that this would be the last time she should ever see Gilbert Denham, and the agony of this knowledge was stronger even than the agony of feeling that she was a found out swindler who would presently be hurled from her high estate.

They had none of them the heart to be just and nothing more. So they promised the guilty pair of crushed women immunity from the punishment that was due to them, and the freedom they did not deserve.

»Go away as soon as you have told all there is to tell,« Frank Stapylton said, impatiently, »and I hope with all my heart we shall never see or hear anything more of you; couple of she-demons that you are, I believe you drove that angel mad.«

»That angel went mad when her husband, George Waldron, died,« Miss Vicary sneered, »or I should not have been tempted to do what I have done; but I'll begin at the beginning.«

»I saw Mr. and Mrs. George Waldron for the first time about six months after their marriage, when I entered her service as her maid. She was a weak, excitable woman. Yes, Mr. Stapylton, lovely as she is, it was a constant source of wonder to me how George Waldron, being what he was, could have attached himself as he did to a mere

pretty fool—and she was an imperious mistress, and from the day I entered her service she was jealous of *me*.«

»Impossible,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron interrupted, scornfully.

»Ridiculous,« both men exclaimed.

»Impossible and ridiculous as you think it, I tell you it is true,« she went on eagerly; »she was jealous of me, and if he had lived longer she would have had reason to be jealous of me, for George Waldron saw that I was clever, and knew that I admired him more than any man I had ever seen. He was too much in love with his fair angel Cecil to take notice of these facts then; but he was a man just like other men, vain and selfish, and if he had lived long enough to tire of his pretty fool he would have taken notice of them.

»I travelled about with them for months in France and Italy, mostly in out-of-the-way places, for they were so satisfied with each other that they had no desire to see any of their friends and acquaintances. From being with her a great deal, and she being weak, as I said, I found out a great many things about them. I found out for instance that he didn't wish ever to meet you, Mr. Stapylton, for his angel had told him how madly in love with her you were at Brighton, and how you wanted to marry her. 'He's George's dearest friend,' she used to lisp out, 'and it would be death to him to see me as George's wife.' Yes, Mr. Stapylton, she used to say that to me, her servant; how do you like the idea of that?

»I heard him pay you a great compliment once,«

she continued, abruptly turning to Horatia, « he had received a letter from you and your photograph, and he said, 'What a lucky fellow Arthur had been to get such a combination of beauty and brains.' That was not too pleasing to her you may rest assured. If ever she does recover her reason she'll hate you more than any one else in the world. Well, these recollections are not so pleasant that I need dwell upon them so. I got to care for George Waldron more than was good for me—more than I ever cared for any one else until«—(she paused and looked at Gilbert Denham, and then went on)—»until, no matter what, for that's past, too. And when he died I was at first nearly as broken hearted as my mistress. When I came out of my first sorrow, the people of the little inn where we were staying, an out-of-the-way place, told me my mistress was mad. Then I sent for my mother, and as soon as she could move Mrs. George Waldron, we took her away to Paris until mother could communicate with the lawyer who managed the Larpington property, and learn enough from the letters we found to enable her to pass herself off as the widow.

»It was all easy enough, for none of his friends knew anything of the woman he had married, and our friends believed that my sister Clarice, who died just about that time in her situation in Paris, had really gone mad, and that we didn't like her to be seen. Only Mr. Carter knew the real truth and—perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that he is my mother's husband?«

She made a pause here, and in pity for the

woman who had so abased herself, none of them spoke. Presently she resumed—

»Mrs. Arthur Waldron, your brother and you between you have hunted me into a hole like a rat, and what have you gained by it? I know that you have disliked us very much, but I'm woman enough to know that you'll ache more when you see George Waldron's angel-faced widow reigning here as Mr. Stapylton's wife. The real contest between the Two Widows dates from to-day.«

She made a pause here, and in pity for the
and—perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that
to be seen. Only Mr. Carter knew the real truth
had really gone mad, and that we didn't like her
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where we were staying, an out of the way place,
out of my first sorrow, the people of the castle
as broken hearted as my mistress. When I came
past too. And when he died I was at first heavily
then went on—silly, no matter what, for that
(she paused, and looked at Gilbert Waldron, and
more than I ever cared for any one else with—

CHAPTER XVI.

„YOU WERE FREE TO CHOOSE.“

It is not necessary to write down a description of all the wearisome legal details that had to be gone into by those who acted on behalf of George Waldron's widow before her right to the estate could be clearly proved. Suffice it to say that her claim was finally established in the eyes of all men, and that five months after the date of Miss Vicary's disclosure Mrs. Waldron was back at Larpington House.

Very carefully, very considerately, and very cleverly had Horatia Waldron acted during this long interval on her sister-in-law's behalf. She had given Cecil all the benefits to be derived from her own tender, true womanly sympathy, compassion, and companionship. She had carefully fostered every weak sign of returning memory, every faint indication of interest both in the past and present. She had encouraged intercourse between Cecil and the man who loved her; and at the end of five months she was rewarded for her prolonged self-abnegation by seeing Cecil in possession of all the powers of mind that had been her original portion.

And these were not prodigious.

In all other things Miss Vicary had been false and deceitful, but there had been neither falsehood nor deception in the estimate she had formed and worded about her former mistress. Even when in fullest possession of all her faculties, Cecil would never be more than a lovely, weak-minded, capricious woman, who would infallibly weary Frank Stapylton before long.

There was mingled pleasure and pain to Horatia in this conviction. Loyal and true as she was in all her dealings with Cecil, and in all her speeches about Cecil, she still was woman enough to be glad that Frank should be compelled to acknowledge her superiority both mentally and morally to Cecil. For he had sought to make Horatia love him before Cecil had re-appeared on the canvas of his life and obliterated the tender impression the other woman had made.

And, on the other hand, she was true woman enough to feel grieved and sorry for the disappointment that would surely be the portion of the man she loved as soon as the glamour was over. No brainless beauty would hold Frank's heart for any length of time. And in his impulsiveness he was likely to pledge his heart to this brainless beauty before he had time to realise that she was only this, and nothing more.

As so much of mind as she had recovered its balance and its tone, and as her memory strengthened, Cecil's real nature developed itself, and Horatia learnt to know her as the shallow creature she was. Frank Stapylton had not formally worded his affection for her yet; but though he was not

her declared lover, she gave herself all those little airs of authority over him, played off all those little coquettish caprices upon him, which are so irritating to another woman to witness, especially when that other woman loves him.

And Frank, though he had not declared himself yet, seemed to like the position of being publicly very much at the feet of the lovely Cecil, who flattered him by giving him her undivided attention on all occasions of their meeting. It did not occur to him that perhaps he owed this honour to the fact of there not being any other man present, Gilbert Denham having taken his departure long ago, before Cecil had learnt to know him at all, in fact.

The real Mrs. Waldron celebrated her restoration to reason and her rights by making Larpington House the scene of a constant succession of gaieties, that kept the whole neighbourhood in a state of excitement. The love for her husband, which overbalanced her mind when he died, seemed to have evaporated during her madness. She very rarely spoke of him at all, and when she did, though she called him »poor George,« there was a tone of indifference in her mention of him that made Frank feel he need not fear a dead rival in her heart.

»But how about a living one?« he asked himself one day, when he saw her surrounded by a group of men, each of whom was demonstrating devotion to the rich, beautiful young widow. And as he watched the scene, a pang of jealousy shot through his heart. He had made so sure of winning her that the first shadow of a doubt of his doing so,

cast him down. Naturally he took his difficulty to Horatia.

»Do you think that Cecil fancies I haven't been very keen about it?« he asked, moodily, directing Horatia's attention to Cecil as he spoke. Mrs. Waldron was making up little button-hole bouquets for two or three of the young men, »making them up with a meaning,« she said, »which they could find out if they understood the language of flowers.«

Horatia looked at Cecil for a minute before she answered him, and he saw the scorn gathering in her face.

»Cecil and I are not on confidential terms; you must understand that, Frank,« she said, earnestly; »but I don't think that she can fancy you have shown any want of keenness on the subject. I am sure you have exhibited your devotion freely enough.«

»You don't think that she has been flirting with me, do you?« he went on questioning. »I heard her saying just the same sort of things to those other fellows just now as she has said to me over and over again; and I thought she meant them, don't you know? You don't think she has been flirting with me?«

»I should think it impossible,« Horatia said, warmly. To her it seemed impossible, utterly impossible, that any woman should dream of playing fast and loose with Frank Stapylton.

»I have been fond of her so long, you see. I declare, after that Brighton affair, I never thought of any other woman but her until I met you,

and then I got so fond of you as a friend, that I can't help boring you with my troubles whenever I'm in any.« Then he paused, and looked at Cecil again with his heart in his eyes; and Horatia had time to marvel how any one could carry on »gay fooling« with other men when Frank was looking at her in such a way.

The group around Cecil had dispersed, leaving only one man sitting on a lower chair than hers by her side. She was leaning back, smelling a rose, and kissing it, and affectedly refusing to give it to him. As he bent forward, pleading for it, with upturned face and admiring eyes, by-standers might reasonably have been forgiven for seeing in him a worshipper at Cecil's shrine.

»Come and play and sing, Frank,« Horatia said, impatiently, as she marked the jealousy gathering in his face. »Don't let any one else see how it affects you.«

»I'm not in the vein for it to-night. Hear her! She's telling that fool, Danvers, who boasts about every woman, that she couldn't *flirt* with him. She has told me that I am the only man she couldn't flirt with. She has given him that rose after kissing it.«

He muttered all this angrily in a low voice; but low as the muttering was, Mrs. Waldron caught a sound of it, and with a light whisper dismissed her other attendant, and then called Frank to her side. He went, meaning to be frigid and bitter, and at the first word from her his revengeful resolve melted away, and she wound another coil of the blue ribbon round his neck.

She had another rose in her hand by this time, and Horatia watched the pantomime of the flower with mixed amusement and indignation.

»Frank,« Cecil began, laying the rose on his arm as he seated himself, »I thought you were never coming near me this evening. Why have you condemned me to the task of entertaining Mr. Danvers and Co., when I wanted you to entertain me?«

»It seems to me you accepted the task readily enough,« he answered, striving to keep up an appearance of cool dignity. But all his striving was proved vain a moment after, when she said—

»I am obliged to be attentive to—other people in my own house; that reserved, illtempered Mrs. Arthur Waldron won't help me, so it all falls on me, and you make the task more difficult for me by looking displeased.«

»It's because I can think of you, and you only,« he told her, fervently. »It's because I grudge every look and word you give to any other fellow.« At this juncture the rose was surrendered to him. »It's because I love you so dearly, Cecil: because I hope and believe that you will give me a different answer to the one you gave me at Brighton.«

»That horrid Mrs. Arthur is watching us,« she laughed out. »I'm afraid she guesses every word we are saying, and it wouldn't do for us to be publicly engaged yet, after all the sensation there has been about me. I do give a different answer to the one I gave at Brighton, Frank; but we must be careful and not show our feelings too openly. You'll know that I love you, and mean to marry you, and that is enough——«

»No, it's not enough,« Frank interrupted. »If you love me, and mean to marry me, why shouldn't we show our feelings openly?—And why shouldn't all the world know that we are going to be married?«

»So many unforeseen things occur,« she said, pensively shaking her head; and by this time her hand was on his arm, and she was pressing it tenderly.

»You're doubtful of me, are you?« he cried out, in a much louder voice than »was desirable,« the discreet young widow thought. »You're not doubtful of me, are you? Oh, no, Cecil, you're not doubtful of me!«

»No, no, no; I'm not in the least doubtful of you. But, Frank, impulsiveness and haste are forgiven in very young people, but not when a woman has had experiences, and another husband. Do be reasonable.«

»Then you're doubtful of yourself,« he declared.

»No, I am not doubtful of myself, I'm only prudent. Men are so imprudent. Now, do go and talk to that wet blanket, Mrs. Arthur Waldron. I believe she's jealous of me; I know she hates me. I must try and make it pleasant for Mr. Danvers. He came down from London on purpose to be introduced, so the reward of a little conversation, that means nothing, won't be too great, will it?«

»It seems to mean so much,« Mr. Stapylton remarked, reproachfully.

»But it does not, and you know that it does not. Why, it's all light and superficial with Mr. Danvers. I am only real with you, dear Frank.«

And with this »dear Frank« had to be satisfied, for Mr. Danvers had his reward immediately, and Frank was cast adrift on his own resources.

»She can't be flirting with me, can she?« he said, reverting to the original topic, and returning to his original position by Horatia's side; and then he went on to tell her, under the seal of the strictest secrecy, that Cecil and himself had just pledged themselves to one another, and Horatia had to relinquish the last hope that had lightened life to her lately, namely, that the folly of the feeble beauty would have weaned him before he took the fatal step.

The hope died in agony in that woman's heart, as the man she loved, who was so sure of her sympathy, made the communication; and as soon as he had finished it she spoke.

»I will preserve your secret, Frank; though why there should be anything 'secret' in the affair at all I don't understand. She is free to be chosen; you are free to choose. From the bottom of my heart I hope you have done wisely and well.«

He looked up at her suddenly; there were tears in her eyes, and her lips were quivering. The conviction smote him in that instant that it would have been wiser and better to have chosen her instead of that old love of his. And something in her face told Horatia what he was feeling.

It was a very brief scene, but the faces of the actors in it were very eloquent, and the beautiful violet eyes of Cecil Waldron took in every detail of it.

CHAPTER XVII.

»THE VESTAL REASON SHALL WATCH THE
FIRE WAKED BY LOVE.«

THE one thing needful to render the fact of being engaged to be married more harassing than it is its normal condition to be, both to man and woman, is the folly of keeping the said fact secret.

Very young girls, especially if they have led the ordinary, uneventful girlish life, may be believed when they state that they were »never so happy in their lives« as now, when they have solemnly pledged themselves to take up life's most important responsibilities in company with some man of whose qualifications for the office they know little, and think less. But I really doubt if any woman of five-and-twenty feels anything but sore perplexity and halfrepentance when she finds that she has gone into the bondage of a promise to marry.

Miserable doubts arise the instant the promise is given—doubts that never suggested themselves while he was the wooer only, not the winner—doubts of his temper, of his tact, of his talent—doubts of his possessing half such a capacity for loving as does some other man who possibly might have proposed if this one had not intervened—doubts of one's own stability and power of enduring the long monotony of an

engagement that sets a young woman apart from the throng, and suggests to other men the propriety of their not attempting to make themselves agreeable to her—doubts of his being the Lancelot of one's life, and dread fears of his being only the king, only Arthur, and of Lancelot turning up later on, when to love him will be sin, and to leave him will be death—doubts of everything, in fact, save the truth of the feeling that one has made a fool of oneself.

Ah me! if I had my time to go over again, I would save myself a world of doubting agony by marrying a man the same hour I accepted him, provided that hour were canonical, of course. And as for bearing the burden in secrecy, unsupported by the sympathy of a sensible section of my fellow-creatures, verily I should have lived in vain if I could be guilty of pursuing that course.

The majority of these sentiments and sensations were the portion of Frank Stapylton to the full as much as they were the portion of Cecil Waldron in those of which I am writing. Their betrothal had been hasty, but it was binding, and both of them felt it to be so, and both of them disliked bonds.

It is a fact that from the moment Frank Stapylton attained what he firmly believed had been the hot desire of his heart for so many years, his heart ceased to have any share in the matter. His taste and his honour told him that he ought to love and marry her; but his reason and his heart told him that he ought not to have taken such an obligation upon himself. Truly he might have addressed these words to her—

»Couldst thou look as dear as when
First I sighed for thee;
Couldst thou make me feel again
Every wish I breathed thee then,
Oh, how blissful life would be!
Hopes that now beguiling leave me,
Joys that lie in slumbers cold,
All would wake, couldst thou but give me
One smile 'dear' as those of old.»

Cecil gave him smiles freely enough when there was no other man to share them with him; but the magic was gone from them for him. They were very bright, very sweet, very becoming to the radiant violet eyes and perfect mouth; but they had lost their power of warming his heart. The changeability, the caprices, the light gaiety of manner, the indifference to every bit of real life that was not amusing—all these things, which had seemed charmingly and childlike and unsophisticated to him before, bored and slightly disgusted him after his engagement. Frank Stapylton was not a genius, but he had a strong understanding, and equally strong affections, and he did shrink from the thought of what his life would be when this woman, who had neither head nor heart, was his wife.

For all her beauty, her grace, and her womanly wiles, she was a wearisome woman to make love to. She could flirt from behind her fan, give soft, sweet looks from her glorious eyes, and kiss roses effusively; but she could not respond to the touch or the tone of love. He would as soon have kissed and caressed the marble Venus in her saloon as he would press her lips or clasp her hand. It was no greater trial to leave her than

it was joy to come to her. And he acknowledged these truths to himself, and, being an honourable fellow, mourned over them.

Essentially a soulless woman, but fair enough to bewilder any man, fully realising her own fairness, and utterly failing to appreciate her own want of soul, the idea never occurred to her that there was anything wanting in Frank's love, or in his manner of developing it. While he would come to her obediently at her own appointed time; while he would listen without interruption to her recital of how jealous »poor George« was of every man who caught sight of her; while he portrayed interest in her new dresses and her interminable schemes of gaiety and plans for »getting people together,« Cecil was perfectly happy and satisfied. She did not desire any display of ardent love—when there was no one by to witness it and say how »madly infatuated that fellow is!« She infinitely preferred soft speeches and subtle hints of hopeless attachment and desperate devotion from two or three men at the same time. These she could answer, parry, respond to brightly, lightly, eagerly enough. But a touch of »thoroughness« would have revealed her in all her beautiful hollowness—and so, perhaps, it was just as well that the touch of thoroughness was wanting in Frank Stapylton's love-making.

Meantime the touch of thoroughness was not wanting in his friendship with Horatia Waldron. Though he did not belong to the order of men who wear their hearts on their sleeves, there was nothing secretive about him; and so, being

tongue-tied towards the rest of the world, by Cecil's desire, he spoke out the more freely to this woman, from whose truthful lips friendship's balmy words fell with such thrilling force. No wonder that he sought her often—far oftener than was wise she knew, but still not oftener than was dearly pleasant to her. No wonder that he told out his thoughts to her, that he talked of hopes that had been high, of love that had been true, of life as it might have been, to this woman who could respond to him.

He came to her in the long summer evenings, when Cecil did not want him; he never defrauded his liege lady of aught that was her rightful due; and somehow or other the long summer evenings, when Cecil did not want him, came to be the most eagerly anticipated and the most fondly-looked-back-upon of this period of his life. He came to Horatia for rest, for sympathy, for interest, for companionship, for pleasure; and she gave him all these things in unconsciously giving him her love—love so profound, so intense, so unselfish, that she would have sacrificed everything on earth (but her children) to have made Cecil, who was to be his wife, the first object of interest to him in the world.

There came one evening when the mask (put on by such faithful hands) nearly fell off, when the narrow boundary line between love and friendship was so nearly crossed, that Horatia awoke to a sense of her own danger. Awoke to a sense of her own danger, but remained steeped in slumbrous ignorance as to his. Then—being only a woman—

she determined to bear, and brave, and risk all possible pain for herself, saying, »On my head this fatal folly of loving in the wrong place will rebound, on my head only; he knows nothing about it. While the dream will last, it shall last without my making an effort to awake from it.«

The scene in which she played the leading part on this occasion was such a pretty one! A fair, soft evening in June, with the »lilies and languors of virtue, and the roses and raptures of love,« lading the air with a wealth of perfume that made every one who inhaled it believe for the time that life was meant to be beautiful and sweet, and that those who lived in it were to blame when ugly sights and hideous sounds and evil odours prevailed.

A dull evening—according to the ordinary estimate of dulness—it had promised to be at first. It is true that she was well supplied with new books, that a new song of Gounod's had been sent to her this day by her brother, and that all the world seemed to be steeped in the rich golden light of the setting sun; but there was no one near to hear her comments on the books, no one to listen to the rapturous words of the song, no one to bask with her in the beautiful golden light; and so her heart felt sadder than it was wont to feel, and terribly alone.

But it so happened that Cecil did not want Frank Stapylton this evening, and he, having the habit of female companionship upon him very strongly at this juncture, came and bestowed his liberty on Horatia. He came in with that look of weary dissatisfaction on his face that appeals so

powerfully to women when they behold it on the faces of the men who interest them; and instantly she divined that something was vexing and perplexing him, and made it her task to chase away the shadow of the vexation and perplexity by a frank display of all the sympathy for him with which her heart was charged.

»The heat has been too much for us both, Frank. I am languid and weary. I feel house-bound in fact, and I've done nothing all day but lie on the sofa and wish that, as we are having tropical heat, we could have tropical customs. What a boon a slave and a punkah would have been to me!«

»And I have done nothing but lie on the grass and try every kind of cooling drink that the ingenuity of man ever invented,« he answered; »and all to no purpose. I reached fever-heat before mid-day, and have kept at it ever since, until I came in here and saw you.«

»And I have had a chilling effect on you?« she laughed. »Well, Frank, for once I am glad to hear it. Prolonged feverheat is exhausting.«

»Anything but chilling,« he answered, in a low voice. »I hardly know what effect you have on me,« he went on. »I think I feel about you as Poe did about his Helen when he wrote—

»'Thy beauty is to me
Like those Nician barks of yore,
That gently o'er a perfumed sea
The weary way-worn traveller bore
To his own native shore.'

I felt weary and way-worn when I came in, and now I feel——«

He paused abruptly, and from some cause or other no words came from her to fill up the pause. They were sitting by the open window, she leaning her head back against the sash, he by her side, lounging on his elbow, idly turning over the leaves of a new magazine; and the dying light of day streamed softly in upon them, harmonizing the whole picture.

»It's like an idyl, isn't it?« he questioned, after a few moments' pause, glancing up suddenly from the page he had not been reading, and letting his eyes rest on hers. »You, in that white dress that folds about you so gracefully, and your dusky hair clouding about your brow—you're like a dream of peace and love.«

»How is Cecil?« she asked, quietly.

»Very well, and very happy, with Mr. Danvers very much at her feet, and a suspicion in her mind that I am getting jealous of him, which suspicion is utterly unfounded.«

»I am glad to hear it; jealousy is a horrible passion, I think.«

»Oh, horrible; nevertheless, I should develop it fast enough under certain conditions, I assure you,« he answered, laughing.

»I am glad, then, for your sake as well as hers, that those conditions are not fulfilled; you are quite right in feeling that you needn't be jealous of Mr. Danvers.«

»But I tell you,« he said earnestly, »that I should be jealous of Danvers or any other fellow if I felt about Cecil as I hoped to feel when I asked her to be my wife. The truth of the matter is, she——«

»Don't let us say anything about her,« Horatia pleaded, eagerly. »You're annoyed at the present moment. Don't say that you are not; and it wouldn't be fair to her to say anything about her to me, nor would it be for me to listen. Oh, dear! the atmosphere will be so much clearer for us all when you are married!«

There was a pathetically-tired strain in her tone as she said this, that revealed a little more than she intended to reveal to him. But, like a man, he craved for more light, for a fuller revelation, even though it should be made to no useful end.

»Will the atmosphere be clearer for you?« he asked softly.

»Yes, because now I am the repository of your secret, and I hate secrets and abhor mysteries.«

»And is that your only reason?« He had taken her hand, and was holding it as he spoke—holding it as if by so doing he would compel her to attend to answer him.

»That is the only reason I can give you,« she said gravely. And he lifted her hand to his lips, and pleaded—

»Do give me another. I tell you everything. Do give me perfect confidence in return. You will, won't you? You will if you have ever cared for me at all.«

Ever cared for him at all, when at that very moment she was caring for him so wildly, so madly, so hopelessly that all her life looked dark before her, because she must yield him to another woman! How could he—how dared he plead so hotly for her friendship, when he had so coldly

renounced her love—and renounced it for the frivolous fancy of a woman who was her inferior in head and heart and mind, her inferior in everything but beauty, indeed, which last possession is, after all, the best dowry we can wish for for our daughters, for men prize it above all others—very properly, of course!

For one moment Horatia let him read her eyes—for one moment she let him hold her hand after he had pressed that warm kiss upon it—and in that one moment the mask nearly fell off, the boundary line was nearly crossed. Then she recovered herself and released them both from the spell.

»There is no other reason to give; if there were, I would treat you quite as the brother I regard you as«—poor, struggling, loving hypocrite!—»and give it to you. Ring for the lamp, will you?»

»No, no; let us have this quiet light a little longer.

»‘Stay with me, lady, while you may,
For life’s so sad, this hour’s so sweet.’«

And again he pleaded, with wistful eyes and a detaining hand. But she would not consent to be spell-bound a second time.

»In spite of your poetical appeal,« she laughed, »I must have my lamp. Cecil and you may like the half-light, but I want to try a new song, and—«

»Cecil and I!« he muttered, impatiently. »What has come to you to-night, that you bring

in Cecil's name in season and out of season? Are you afraid that I shall forget her?»

»No,« she said, stoutly, though it was a hard thing to say.

»Not that she gives me much to remember her by,« he went on complainingly. »Poor George's views are things that pall upon a man after any number of vain repetitions; and she can hardly expect me to carry a catalogue of her dresses in my mind, or to dwell with fervour on the memory of Mr. Danvers' vain speeches.«

»You did remember her very devotedly as the only woman you had ever loved,« she said, with an effort.

»I beg your pardon. I remembered her with a sort of fictitious fidelity, as the only girl I had ever loved. My love for a woman would be something very different.«

»Cooler, more reasonable, having to do more with the head than the heart,« she said, in desperation, for the subject had a fell fascination for her, dangerous as she felt it to be.

»More reasonable, if you like, but certainly not cooler; and naturally it would have to do with the head as well as the heart. I know now, when it is too late, the sort of woman—the only woman—for whom I could feel a *grand passion*.«

»And now, as it is too late, you had better not nourish the idle feeling by talking about it.«

»If by 'idle' you mean 'unreal,' you're mistaken,« he said. »The feeling is real enough; unluckily the chances of gratifying it are wretchedly small.«

She got up, half-vexed, half-pleased, like the

thorough woman she was. Naturally she was vexed that the knowledge of his love for herself had come to him when it was too late. It was equally natural that she should be pleased by the knowledge of the fact that he loved her at all, inopportunately as it was made known to him. Still, as I have said, she was a thorough woman, and pleasure was her dominant sensation as she moved from the window to the piano.

He was following her, but she looked back and shook her head.

»No, no; stay where you are. The high notes will go through your brain if you come any nearer.« And then she sang Gounod's new song, and her voice sounded as delightfully in the ears of the man who loved her as if she had been a Patti or a Nilsson.

Presently she turned round on the music-stool and told him of a »resolution she had formed.« She did not mention that she had only formed it since that unfortunate fit of candour of his had warned her that the mask might fall off at any moment.

»I am quite tired of life at Larpington,« she began, »and my children will soon require educational advantages that they cannot get here. Don't you think I am a wise woman in determining to leave this place, and go to London or near London?«

»Good heavens, no!« he answered, disobeying her injunction to remain where he was, and coming over to her in haste that betokened far too great an interest in her and her proceedings.

»Yes, indeed; and I thought you would have

approved of my intention. When I woke from my dream«—it may be supposed that she was referring to that dream of her boy's coming into possession of the Larpington estate, which was never destined to be fulfilled now—»when I woke from my dream, I felt that there was nothing left to keep me here now.«

»Nothing left to keep you here!« he said, reproachfully. »Of course, I have no right to expect that you should think of me for an instant; but, by Jove! what a ghastly vacuum in my life your going will cause!«

Her heart palpitated in response to the genuine regret, the genuine, jealous chagrin he was displaying. But she did not dare to let its palpitations betray themselves by means of faltering tones or quivering lips. Very lightly and steadily she spoke.

»You will soon fill up that vacuum with a far nearer and dearer interest, Frank; and though I don't think for a second that you'll forget me—our friendship has been too true and sweet a thing, I think, for either of us ever to forget it—still, you won't miss me much, believe me.«

»Not miss you much! My life will be a blank without you,« he said, desperately. And when he said that Horatia knew that it was well, it was wise, it was needful that she should go.

His mind was full of her the next day—full of her and her winning charm, and the weariness that stretched out before him as he thought of her going away—full of her to the point of rendering him abstracted in the presence of Cecil, who

observed the abstraction after a time, unobservant as she was generally.

»Were you very much disappointed at my not telling you to come here last evening?« she asked.

»No,« he answered, truthfully; »you told me the other day, you know, that you would be engaged. Was Danvers up to his usual attractive mark?«

»He was more charming than ever, and he seemed to think me more charming than ever. Is that what is making you so glum to-day, Frank?«

He shook his head.

»What is it, then? You are not up to *your* usual attractive mark, I can assure you. Where were you last night?«

»I called on Mrs. Arthur,« he stammered, a little confusedly.

»Then you must never call there again,« she said, slowly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CECIL DRAWS HER SWORD.

THEN ensued one of those foolish, recriminatory, futile dialogues which are so painfully humiliating to look back upon; dialogues which leave the conductors of them exactly in the same place at the end as they were at the beginning; dialogues in which spite supplies the eloquence of the accusation on the one side, and a full knowledge of having a very poor cause makes the defence a lame and impotent one on the other; dialogues in which the majority of us have taken part at some period or other of our lives, it is to be presumed, for we have all been unjustly treated in our time, or have treated some other unjustly—we have all spoken or been spoken to in jealous warmth—we have all done battle against some imaginary foe or rival, or defended some friend or lover from the one who depicts them as antagonists. And so we can all understand that Frank Stapylton was not exalted in his own eyes when he came out of the verbal contest with Cecil in which, for the first time, she showed openly her animosity against and jealousy of Horatia Waldron.

Cecil had the power which is invested in the hands of a beautiful woman who holds a man's pledge to marry her—a power which is increased

tenfold when a man has professed more love than he feels, and when he is heartily ashamed of falling short of his profession. The real Cecil was very different to the ideal Cecil, but he could not utterly separate them yet; and he shrank from the thought of the woman whom he had loved so long discovering that he loved her no longer.

Her jealousy was very patent to him, but it was not the jealousy an exhibition of which flatters a man's loving self-esteem. It was the jealousy of vanity, not of love. She grudged Mrs. Arthur Waldron the confidence and the friendship of Frank Stapylton, not because she desired to have these things herself, but because she disliked Mrs. Arthur Waldron, and would have preferred to feel that Horatia's life was barren of all those interests which made up the sum of life to Cecil herself.

»It's a slight to me—a slight that no other man on earth would offer me,« she said, »that you should go and pay her such attention that every one in the village must know you like her. When a man is engaged his time belongs to the woman to whom he is engaged. Poor George never gave a look or a word to any one but me.«

»You must remember that my opportunities of giving you either looks or words are rather limited, Cecil. I should be with you much more than I am, if you'd let me come.«

»Oh, how unjust, how dreadfully unjust you are, Frank, reproaching me for my consideration for you in that way! I don't want other people to say that I am making a slave and a fool of you, and that is what would be said if you were always about after me.«

»It seems to me,« Frank grumbled, »that no one could say that if it were known that we were engaged.«

»But it can't be known that we are engaged. I don't want it to be known that we are engaged—yet. After all I have gone through«—Cecil always reverted to »all she had gone through,« when she wanted to subdue strong men—»it's cruel, cruel of you to want to make me the talk of the neighbourhood again so soon; but because I won't make myself a subject for idle gossip is no reason that you should go and and make yourself conspicuous with Mrs. Arthur, and hurt my feelings. If you had a real regard for me you would cut her.«

»Cecil, you would despise me if I were such a pusillanimous cur, for I should be that if, without the slightest reason, the faintest shadow of a cause I were to cut a woman who has been uniformly my friend—a woman whose judgment, and heart, and life are as golden as they can be.«

»That's nonsense,« Cecil said, pettishly; »she professes a great deal, I know; but she's reserved, and I hate reserved people; they're all bad. And as for your friendship with her—poor George used to say that friendships between young men and women were always in questionable taste; and though she isn't so very young——«

»What would poor George have said of your rather pronounced friendship with Mr. Danvers?« Frank interrupted, coolly. »I am rather interested in hearing what his views would have been on that subject.«

»That it is quite a different affair. I am an engaged woman——«

»And I am an engaged man.«

»But she doesn't know it.«

»And he doesn't know it.«

»I don't know about that,« Mrs. Waldron laughed, with a little air of triumph; »when men are in love they are very quick to see. You needn't grudge him my society. He feels, poor fellow, I know he feels, that I am not for him.«

»I wish with all my heart you were!« was Frank Stapylton's inward thought; but he said—

»Then, on my word, I don't think you ought to keep him dangling after you in this way. If you can see that the fellow is ready to make a fool of himself——«

»I said ready to fall in love with me. It's not very complimentary to me to find that you think that he is making a fool of himself.«

»It is, under the circumstances.«

»Then what are you making of Mrs. Arthur Waldron?«

»It is impossible to make anything of her but the best and nicest woman in the world.«

»It is cruel to say that,« Cecil piped, »when you know how I hate her, when you know what good reason I have to hate her.«

»Now, what reason on earth can you possibly assign for hating her? My dear Cecil, do be reasonable, and——«

»Be reasonable, indeed! I believe she has taught you to taunt me by using that phrase. Why can't she and you let me forget that I have been mad?«

»Now, my darling, this is too much,« he groaned; »I would spare you every thought of that wretched time when your life was darkened by sorrow and cruelty, and so would she, I know.«

»I don't care whether she would or not, Frank. If she thinks I am ashamed of having been afflicted because my heart was so much more tender, and my feelings so much more sensitive than other people's, she is mistaken; it's no use her attempting to play upon me for that.«

»You're making her out to be a monster of cruelty.« he said, with a tone of despairing resignation.

»And evidently you can say nothing in her defence.«

»My partizanship does her more harm than good with you, and makes you hurl accusations that you will bitterly repent having made at her.«

Oh, Frank, you threaten me with the pangs of remorse about her! How can you do that? I couldn't live if I felt remorseful about anything; and you quietly tell me, with mysterious certainty, that I shall feel remorseful about her! You couldn't do it if you loved me.«

Feeble woman's last and strongest weapon of attack!

»You couldn't do it if you loved me!« What is a man who is professing love for her to do but declare that he does love her, and that he »won't do it again,« as the children say. Happily, however, for himself, and for the reader's toleration towards Horatia's opinion of him, Frank did not so demean himself.

»Even if you doubted my love, you would not put it to such a degrading test, seriously, Cecil,« he said, rather gravely. »But you do not doubt it, therefore why wrong yourself and me with these mere chimeras of your brain?«

»My brain, always my brain, becomes the topic when you have been with her,« Cecil cried, petulantly. »The clever woman! She never lets you forget that my 'brain' was weaker for a time than hers is! How kind, and womanly, and sisterly, and nice it is of her! Danvers sees through her, though you don't. Danvers is so sympathetic with me, that he sees through her thoroughly.«

»I wish Mr. Danvers would keep the expression of his keen sympathy to himself,« Frank said, stiffly, for it is one of the most beautifully-marked traits in our inconsistent natures that, however lightly we may prize our own, we do not glow with satisfaction when we discover that our own keenly appreciates being highly prized by others.

»Ah! but he's one of the men who can't keep things to themselves. He's not deceitful; you can see in a moment in his eyes what he feels; they're really speaking eyes, Frank. Have you noticed them?«

Frank had failed to »notice Mr. Danvers's eyes.«

»Well, I wonder at that, because they're so peculiar—quite beautiful. There's a sort of 'love me' look in them that one doesn't often see.«

»Thank heaven for that!« Mr. Stapylton observed.

»Now, why do you say that, Frank?« Cecil, who was well mounted and eager to be off on the

new hobby, asked. »Now, why do you say that?«

»Because the fewer fellows who go about with an idiotic, languishing 'love me' look in their eyes the better, I should say.«

»Yes, certainly; I should agree with you, if it was idiotic. But his is not; it's a most thrilling, soul-filled glance. I wish you could see it as I do.«

»Thank you; but I haven't the slightest desire to do so; the sight would be rather a sickening one.«

»I really believe you're doing Mr. Danvers the honour to be jealous of him.«

»You're mistaken, Cecil; I'm not doing myself the dishonour of doing anything of the sort. The moment I found myself jealous of a fellow like Danvers, I should relinquish my right to be jealous of you at all.«

»That is one of Mrs. Arthur Waldron's sentences. She thinks she talks well, and——«

»I am not in the habit of having words put into my mouth by Mrs. Arthur Waldron, or any one else, Cecil, my child. Why will you do yourself and me so much injustice?«

»Why will you irritate me into being unjust (not that I am unjust) by extolling and flattering a woman I dislike, with good reason?«

Frank sighed heavily. Cecil argued in a circle, and was now beginning at exactly the same part of the round from whence she had originally started.

»Let us leave her name out of the conversation,« he said; and she answered quickly—

»So I will, if you'll leave her out of your life.«
From this day, Cecil steadily interposed herself

and her commands between Frank Stapylton and every opportunity he might have had of seeing Horatia. Mrs. Waldron would still invite the pair to meet under her auspices, but she sadly kept them apart when she was not present to keep her wary watch and see with delight how Horatia winced under the estranged and altered manner of the man who was conscious of acting a double part.

For Cecil, in drawing her sword on Horatia, had driven him over the narrow boundary line, and, to his own sorrow, he knew that that which he felt for Arthur's widow was not friendship, but love. What wonder that, in his impotent remorse, in his pitiful helplessness, in his fettered misery, he should have taken refuge in a demeanour that was utterly foreign, and be sometimes almost repellent, and at others almost penitential, and at others almost bitter towards the woman to whom he dared not be natural?

And she partially fathomed the real motive of his chameleon-like manner at times, and at others was pained, puzzled, almost maddened by it. The change from such free, frank friendship as theirs had been to mere conventional civilities, or studied avoidance, or bitter badinage, wrung her heart and hurt her pride, but failed to kill her love.

It soon had the effect upon her of making her long to quit the place. »If I could only get out of it—get away from the probability of seeing him, and seeing him with Cecil, who likes to show him as her slave to me; if I could only wake up of a morning with the knowledge that at least I had done something to put myself out of his orbit,

perhaps the sting would be less sharp, and this change might strengthen me to bear the truth.«

So thinking, so hoping and believing, she hastened her preparations for leaving the Bridge House. She wrote to her brother Gilbert, begging him to come and help her to separate the household gods she meant to take, from the household gods she meant to leave behind. And for the first time in his life, Gilbert Denham was deaf to the request of his sister. He would not come back to Larpington.

During all the dreary time of selecting, and packing, and bewildering herself about a future residence, Frank Stapylton kept away from Mrs. Arthur Waldron, greatly to his own shame and sorrow, and intensely to the satisfaction of Cecil, who felt like a victorious general driving a foe from the field.

»You see,« young Mrs. Waldron would say triumphantly to her humbled betrothed, »directly you leave off going there she finds the place unendurable, and quits it. That convinces me that she thought you were making love to her, whether you were or not.«

»Perhaps we had better not analyse the reasons why I don't go there any more,« he answered, in intemperate haste; and something in his face and tone and manner made Cecil feel that it would be as well for her to proclaim the engagement and bind him faster without delay.

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The day dawned that was the last before that fixed for Horatia Waldron to leave the house

to which she had come in hope for her boy, and was now leaving in something very like despair about herself. She was glad, and she was sorry, that the time was so near for her to get out of the atmosphere that was full of such sweet poison for her; glad with a gladness, and sorry with a sorrowfulness, that can only be felt and only be understood by a woman who is in love.

The house was dismantled; its charm was altogether dispelled. The children were playing at wild beasts in the empty drawing-room, and the servants were looking as if the «curse had come upon them» because the appliances that tended to their comfort were most of them packed up. There was something uncanny about the familiar place, something unreal, perplexing, disturbing. She longed to get away from it; and yet she loved it so well for its associations! For it was here that she had shackled herself with the shackles woman loves so well; it was here she had come to a knowledge of all her strength and all her weakness; here she had lost her peace, and found her master.

Small marvel that she longed to leave a place that was to her both Paradise and prison! Small marvel that there was no rest for her body or mind during the whole of this day, for she was feeling

»A few short hours, and I am borne
Far from the fetters I have worn!
A few short hours, and I am free!
And yet I shrink from liberty,
And look, and long to give my soul

Back to thy cherishing control.
Control? Ah! no; thy bond was meant
Far less for bond than ornament,
And tho' its links be firmly set,
I never found them gall me yet.

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And now the truth comes swiftly on—
The truth I dare not think upon,
The last sad truth so oft delayed—
'These joys were only born to fade.' «

In her pitiful restlessness, in her desperate disquiet, in her agonising knowledge that never again—oh! never again after this day—would she have even the miserable satisfaction of knowing that he was near her, she could not remain in one place, nor beguile the time with any occupation. She had taken leave of Mrs. Waldron—who had taken the opportunity of treating the subject of her engagement to Frank in an exhaustive manner—and she had said good-bye to all the people in the village. The only one whom she had known in this place who had not wished her farewell and God-speed was Frank Stapylton.

And she was going away to-morrow.

She tried hard, poor thing, to think that the greater part of the sorrow she felt in leaving Larpington was caused by the forced renunciation of all her hopes respecting little Gerald and the succession to the estates. But, loving, loyal mother as she was, she knew that in striving to do this she was striving to lie to herself, the real sting lay in the fact that she was leaving Frank Stapylton.

The woods were in all their summer beauty

now, wreathed with honeysuckle and briar roses, fragrant with wild thyme, radiant with the scarlet pimpernel, the blue »birds'-eyes,« and the purely golden celandine. »The woods will be better than the house,« she thought, »for no one will come there, and I can look as I like, without fear of any one making mistakes.«

The woods stretched all round Larpington, but the one to which she went had a river running through it, and this decided her choice; for the river was well filled with trout, and with a rod and a fly in one's hand a human being may be as sadly pre-occupied in mind, as absorbed and altogether apart from others, as he or she pleases, without reproach.

She placed herself under the shade of the bank, on the trunk of a tree that had fallen right across the stream, forming a natural bridge; and there she sat through the heat of the day, dreaming, and letting the trout escape her.

By-and-bye, from under her screen she saw two figures sauntering on the opposite side of the river, and her heart jumped to the conclusion that they were Cecil and Frank. The man was partly concealed from her by Cecil's floating draperies and Cecil's sun-shade, but he sauntered by Cecil's side as only a lover would saunter. He turned his head to her now and again, as only a lover would turn it.

She would not be a coward; she would not rise up and flee from before that loving pair. They might see her if they liked to rouse themselves from their absorption in each other and look across the stream. So she sat on whipping the

stream, with balls of fire dancing before her eyes, and such a longing for the morrow in her heart!

Presently the airy draperies ceased to flutter in the wind, the slow stroll that suggested such a love of lingering together on the part of the strollers ceased, and Horatia's unwilling eyes saw Cecil place herself on a piece of the high, broken bank, and rest her arm upon her companion's shoulder; and as she did so he bent his head and met her upturned face, and kissed her, unrebuked, with a privileged lover's easy assurance. And as he raised his head again and looked across the stream, Horatia saw that it was not Frank Stapylton.

Then rose such a storm of wrathful indignation in her heart that the man she loved so well should be so lightly, shamefully betrayed by the woman he loved—such a storm of feeling, such a tempest of conflicting emotions, such a passionate despair as the conviction of her own peculiar inability to set the matter straight came home upon her.

She, nourishing such feelings as she did herself about him in her heart, could not go to him with the tale of Cecil's toying with another man. Even he, knowing her as he did (every woman in love flatters herself with the delusion that the object really understands her), even he might misconstrue her motives, and imagine that she was vainly hoping to catch his heart in the rebound. She could not tell him of it, but she would get away from the sight of such hideous perfidy.

So she rose, collecting her tackle, and making a slight, unintentional gurgle in the water by means of some big pieces of decayed bark which

she knocked off the fallen tree. And as she did so they looked across and saw her, and knew that they themselves were seen.

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»It was only a kiss; why worry yourself about it? It was only a kiss, and you have given me many, darling. Surely you're not going to regret them?«

»But she will go and tell of it; it will be just like her to tell,« Cecil said, plaintively. »It's just what a mean, jealous thing like she is would do. I am sure I would never tell if I saw a dozen men kissing her. She'd be welcome to it. But she will make mischief.«

»But she can't make mischief,« Danvers said. »Your delicacy exaggerates everything. What mischief can be made by the fact getting about (even if it does get about) that the man you're going to marry kissed you? You're not ashamed of your love for me, are you, darling?«

»Ashamed!—No. But, Charlie, I'm so cruelly hampered,« she whispered. »You don't know what I have to go through—what pressure is put upon me. Frank Stapylton thinks I'm going to marry him.«

CHAPTER XIX.

DOUBLY FALSE.

NERVOUSLY, in her haste to avoid a repetition of the sight that had hurt and shocked her for Frank's sake, Mrs. Arthur Waldron stumbled and slipped now and again as she mounted the rugged bank of the river. She was encumbered with her rod and tackle, she was enfeebled by the fact of the light summer dress she wore perpetually catching in some jagged knoll and pulling her back; she was harassed by the consciousness that the pair on the other side of the river were watching her progress; but, above all, she was burdened by the knowledge she had of having witnessed that with which Frank Stapylton ought to be made acquainted, and the feeling that it would be impossible for her to tell him of it.

It had been a terrible trial to her that she should thus have played the part of unintentional spy on the dubious actions of a pair whom she thoroughly disliked and heartily despised. To a generous nature there must always be a large amount of pain in getting the advantage of an adversary by chance. She felt supremely disgusted with Cecil for her perfidy; but, at the same time, she felt a good deal of soft pity for the pangs of humiliation which she imagined Cecil must be

enduring on account of having been found out. That Cecil was not enduring them is not at all to the purpose. Horatia went through just as much vicarious suffering as if Cecil had been a better woman.

It seemed such a tedious, long, neverending ascent, that from the river brink to the level road through the wood; and yet she was only two or three minutes in making it. But the knowledge of being watched and disliked for having existed at this juncture on this spot, and of being regarded as altogether a superfluity in the great scheme of humanity by the pair opposite, acted like a clog on her feet. She seemed to herself to be walking as one walks in a dream, to be making strenuous efforts to get on, that were rendered null and void by nothing in particular; and everything became more perplexing, dreamlike, and bewildering still, when, on turning into the deep shadow of the wood, she found herself face to face with Frank Stapylton.

He was walking slowly, but there was something in his gait, slow as it was, that told of impatience, and a vexed anxiety to get over or go through with something. He was kicking the rich, streaming summer grasses that grew in his path, and switching off the foliage that hung down about him motionless in the soft midsummer air. There was on his face both flush and frown; there was angry light in his eyes, and this light did not die out when he lifted them and saw Horatia.

In her vivid remembrance of the scene she had just witnessed, she felt like a guilty creature before him as he paused and said to her,

»The woods seem to be the favourite haunt to-day. Cecil promised to meet me here an hour ago, but she has forgotten her promise, or missed the trysting-place. Which is it, do you think?»

With her face burning, with her heart beating unequally, with her whole frame quivering with indignation at her own falseness and Cecil's folly, she answered,

»It is so easy to be unpunctual in these woods at this season. I meant to be at home an hour ago, and see, here I am still.«

He looked at her steadily as she spoke, with a look he had never given her before—a look of such interrogation and of such command that she absolutely winced under it.

»You know very well,« he said, quietly, »that if you had promised to meet me here—me or any one else—you would have been here; you wouldn't have gone off for a walk with—or without—any one else. You would have been here.«

For one moment she tried to nerve herself to the task of telling this man that he was being betrayed, cajoled, befooled. But she could not do it. The dread of misapprehension, the fear of being malicious, the horror of being treacherous, in seeming even, to one of her own sex—all these feelings were too strong for her to wrestle with them successfully. She could only be silent—and sorry for him.

»My time here is nearly run out,« she said, trying to shift the subject. »I go away to-morrow, and always at the last hour there are so many

things to be done; so I shall say good-bye to you now, Frank; and I hope I shall hear of you soon as married and happy.«

It was a courageous thing to say, and she said it courageously. Let us hope and pray that our daughters may never be called upon to utter similar words to the men they love—for after it, the utterance of every other lie is an easy thing.

He took the hand she held out to him, and retained it—but not lovingly, no one need be shocked—retained it severely almost, as he said,

»What is it? Your eyes don't deceive, you see; one can look right through them into your soul. You're keeping something from me. What is it?«

»What is it?« she said, evasively. »Falsely emotional folly, I think, about leaving Larpington and its woods and associations. Do let me be sorry without asking why, Frank. I have so many things to think about, you know. Railway travelling may upset my children, and my chairs and tables may all be smashed to pieces in the transit. When Cecil and you come to see me in London, you'll find me much more at my ease.«

He flung her hand from him, and leant back against a tree, while he lighted a cigar in the convulsive way in which men do light cigars occasionally, when the conviction is brought home to them that there's »nothing new and nothing true.«

»Don't try to humbug me. You have seen Cecil!«

She felt her cheeks grow scarlet as he spoke, looking at her the while with that glance of keen interrogation under which she found it so difficult a matter to stand at ease and look as though she had a clear conscience.

»You have seen Cecil!« he repeated; and this time there was no interrogation in his tone; there was confident, rather angry assertion only.

»Yes; I have seen her, but I have not seen her to speak to her,« she answered, hurriedly.

»Now, Frank, you must let me go home. Do be pitiful, and think of all my travelling trials to-morrow.«

»And you know the cause of her not being here to meet me as she promised?«

»I have told you that I have not seen her to speak to,« she answered, impatiently; and then he melted her to softest pity by shaking his head mournfully, and saying—

»There was no need to speak to her; you saw the cause, and so did I. Don't you try to throw dust in my eyes. That fellow is with her—making love to her!«

There was bitter denunciation of Mr. Danvers and his conduct in Frank's tone and manner, and the conviction that he was a trifle unjust smote her. For if ever a man could plead in extenuation of an offence, »It was the woman tempted me,« Mr. Danvers might plead this with respect to Cecil Waldron.

»Perhaps he is not altogether to blame,« she said; »he may not know that Cecil is engaged to you, and you ought to understand, better than any

one else, how very strong the temptation to love her must be.«

»I don't understand a woman promising to marry one fellow, and fooling with another, and I don't understand a man with any sense of honour making love to another man's promised wife. You know they're wrong all round, you must know it, though you won't admit it to me.«

»And you know, though perhaps you won't even admit it to yourself, that you would feel very indignant with me if I even censured Cecil by implication,« she said, promptly. »No, no, Frank; she is too dear to you and too near to you for any other woman's opinion to come between you with impunity to that other woman.«

»If that were quite true I should not be listening here now, while Cecil is improving the shining hours over yonder with Danvers. No; the fact is, she was very dear to me, but she has nearly cured me; and if she will only ask for her liberty, she shall have it without a word of reproach from me.«

»It would be giving her what she would not value, and leaving you poor indeed.«

»It would be leaving me a richer man than I shall be if she does eventually bestow herself upon me,« he replied, bitterly. »You know well enough that a man isn't easily blinded after the sight we have seen to-day.«

And she thought, »O, fool that I am, to fancy he is cured of the folly of loving in the wrong place, any more than I am myself! Though his

eyes have been opened to-day, he will trust her again and again, as blindly as ever—for, ah me! she has a lovely face.»

Even as she thought it, Cecil advanced gaily into their midst, walking freely and prettily, as though not a single doubt fettered her footsteps; and by her side was the companion of her idyllic stroll, Mr. Danvers.

It is hard, after a man has just been described as occupying an ignominious position to think of him as any other than ignominious in character and aspect. Unquestionably Mr. Danvers had, according to the judgment of Mrs. Arthur Waldron and Frank Stapylton, been playing a mean and dubious, not to say false and unpardonable part. He had been making warm love to the woman who was the promised wife of another man, and who, according to all the sacred laws of honour, ought to have been held sacred to that other man. Looked at from this point of view, his conduct admitted of no excuse. There were no extenuating circumstances about it; it was altogether vain and unprofitable; it was altogether bad.

But there was a reverse to this bold, brazen shield, on which his conduct was blazoned unblushingly. His worst folly, in reality, was that he believed in the woman by his side; his worst sin was his utter surrender of all his judgment and all his will to her caprices; his only fault in the matter was his ignorance of the relations that existed between Frank Stapylton and Cecil Waldron.

The love of deceiving is the dominant element in the natures of some women. If their paths lie straight before them, they shrink from following those paths, and seek out the tortuous and the winding ways by preference. Cecil had no love for Mr. Danvers; he did not even interest her greatly; but, for the sake of keeping him in her thrall, she was freely false to him about the man to whom she was engaged; she made light contemptuous mention of Frank's devotion to her; she implied that it bored her; she insinuated that she had rejected his proffered love, and that it was only the blindest, maddest, most persistent infatuation which kept him in her path still. And all the time she meant to marry Frank Stapylton, and meant to let Mr. Danvers drift whithersoever fate willed that he should drift.

She was staggered for a moment when she found herself face to face with Frank, but it was only for a moment that her vanity-flushed face changed in hue, and her purpose faltered. She was certainly an able woman in this matter of wriggling herself out of a difficulty. That moment passed and she was portraying light, loving displeasure at meeting Frank with Mrs. Arthur Waldron.

»It was a fortunate thing that I had some one to speak to, Mr. Stapylton,« she said, »while I was waiting all this weary time for you. You, it seems, had forgotten your appointment.«

»His appointment! Oh, Cecil, you didn't expect him, did you?« Danvers whispered.

»Hush! and don't call me Cecil,« she took an opportunity of muttering, as—Horatia was shaking hands with, and saying good-bye to, Frank Stapylton once more. Then she turned to her sister-in-law.

»It's quite a pleasant surprise to see you again, Mrs. Arthur. I thought you had left this morning. Did you want to watch unseen over any of your friends, that you struck a premature note of departure?«

All this time Frank had not spoken, but there was more than the shadow of the suspicion of a taunt in Cecil's last words, and he answered her coldly,

»I can answer for it that Mrs. Arthur Waldron wouldn't watch unseen over the meanest creature on earth, with the idea of bringing confusion on that mean creature's head.« And Danvers telegraphed an inquiry with his eyes to Cecil as to whether she meant to put up with that?

She had every trick at command wherewith to deceive any number of her fellow-creatures who were in any degree better, truer, and more loyal than she was herself; she had every trick at command, and she could use all tricks at any given moment. Credit her with wonderful adaptability. She could look as mournfully pathetic as a monkey, whenever she thought that by so looking she might possibly serve her own interests. So she looked her most mournfully pathetic now—looked it at each man quickly, spasmodically, cleverly, until each man believed in her again, as all his own in her heart—until each man distrusted the other out of all bounds of reason, and was

ready to trust her again to his own destruction; and each man was ready to blame the other for so trusting; and each one would have witheringly blamed the other had he expressed or entertained hard thoughts of her. In short, each one was bewitched for the time being, and so ready to have his feelings tinged by any colour she chose to throw over her proceedings.

»At any rate, either seen or unseen, I shall watch over Larpington no longer, for I really go to-morrow morning, Cecil, and so good-bye to you all.« And thus at last Horatia got herself away from their midst, and hoped heartily as she walked away, that she had »done with them« and with their distracting influences »for ever.«

At least, she conscientiously and honestly hoped this for a brief period; and after this brief period—it was a very brief one—she began to conjecture which of the two men Cecil really loved, and which she would make really happy eventually, and which, by losing Cecil, would be the winner; and, in fact, generally to vex her own soul, as does a woman most surely who ever makes the mistake of taking too much interest about any of her fellow-creatures.

And so the hours came and went, finding her and leaving her in perplexity, until the time came for her to start and enter upon the new life in the new London home she had chosen, far from all those who had entangled themselves about her path, and whom she could not hate for so doing. And even as she travelled away from it all, to the monotonous buzzing and whirring of the train

the words set themselves, »How will it end? how will it end?«

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A cleverer woman than Cecil might have been excused for finding it difficult to discover and take a safe and pleasant path out of this maze into which she had wandered; but she was quite equal to the call that was made upon her powers of strategy and diplomacy. Calmly, as soon as Horatia left them, did Cecil place herself between the two men, and addressing Mr. Danvers, who looked the more warmly angry of the two, said,

»Now that we have been fortunate enough to meet Mr. Stapylton, we may as well all three of us walk back to that lovely river. It's like a bit of fairy-land. You must come and enjoy it with me, Frank.«

She dropped her voice to a mere murmur as she pronounced his name with a falteringly tender accent; and for the moment he was carried away against his reason into the folly of believing that she felt what she was seeming to feel. Still, it had not been in the bond that he was to meet Danvers in the wood, and that Danvers should mount guard over the interview. It was altogether ridiculous and incongruous; it was altogether unjust and heartless of Cecil; it was a thing against which it behoved him to make a stand.

»Probably Mr. Danvers has had enough of the bank of the river for one day. Why should we take him back there?«

We! It was identifying himself with her in a way that was as the root of bitterness to poor Danvers. We! How could Cecil, whom he looked upon as his own—Cecil, who had let him kiss her on the lips only just now—Cecil, who had been sweetly protesting to him that she was more than indifferent to Frank Stapylton—how could she permit Stapylton to link himself together with her in this way unrebuked? He waited for a moment, and then, as Cecil did not rebuke the bold imputation of an alliance, Danvers took the matter of chastisement into his own hands.

»It seems to me that it's rather the other way,« he said, »I'm entirely at Mrs. Waldron's orders for the day—and for ever, as far as that goes. We needn't take you out of the way to go to the river——«

»Oh, hush! hush!« she interrupted; and she was at her sweetest and prettiest as she said it. »Here am I monopolising you both so selfishly, and I'm sure I hear something—a cry just as if somebody were calling out. Oh, listen! Don't you think it's Horatia, Frank? What can have happened?«

They did not hear anything, these men whom she addressed, but how could they realise this unimportant fact when she was addressing them in accents of panting anxiety? She was startled, anxious, miserable apparently about that other woman who had just quitted them. What could they be but startled and anxious, too?

»Hush! hush!« she kept on saying in her overwhelming manner. »Perhaps she has slipped

into the river—the bank is so apt to crumble. I feel sure it's that. Do run and see.«

She addressed Frank; and though he felt convinced that Horatia had not been guilty of the folly of slipping into the river, nor of doing anything else that was melodramatic and awkward, still he felt himself bound to go off on his vague mission, and set the fictitious fears of his liege lady at rest. But even as he went, he had upon him the stinging sense of being befooled by her. »For some reason or other, she wants to get rid of me, and her *ruse* is so contemptibly transparent!« he thought. Still he walked on, and Cecil had the opportunity she wanted.«

»Charlie, you must put up with Mr. Stapylton's manner,« she began, imploringly. »I haven't had the courage to tell you before, but really he has some reason for assuming it.

»You don't mean to tell me, you can't wish me to believe that you have been giving him encouragement?« Danvers asked, reproachfully. And then she gave him a pretty effective, garbled version of the state of the case.

»He pressed me hard when I was getting better, you know, and he had been so kind! It was through him that I was found and taken away from those dreadful women whose cruelty drove me out of my mind; and then he had loved me for so many years, and I was so weak and so afraid of everybody, that I really hadn't the courage to refuse him.«

»You don't mean that you're engaged to him?«

»Well, I have promised to marry him.«

»Oh, Cecil, this is not fair to me. You must tell him at once how things are with us. I will not have my promised wife placed for another hour in such a dubious position.«

»But I'm his promised wife, too,« she whimpered. »How cruel every one is! I believe, between you, you will drive me mad again. I believe it's what you want to do. How can you, Charlie? And you pretend to be so fond of me?«

He felt that it was a feeble-minded thing on his part to do, but he actually at this attempted to reason with her.

»My darling, should I be fond of you if I could tamely allow this order of things to exist an hour longer?«

»But it must exist an hour longer, and a good many hours longer, unless you want to kill me. I must break it to him by degrees. Oh, why won't you let me do it my own way, comfortably?«

»Our ideas of comfort don't coincide at all, Cecil. You must promise me that you won't let him harbour this delusion an hour longer, or I shall think that your vows and protestations to me have been false as the devil.«

»And when I tell him he will say just the same things—just the same cruel things,« Cecil murmured, with an air of large appeal against the injustice of it all. »He's gone off now as jealous as he can be, I can see it.«

»But he has no right to be jealous,« Danvers persisted. »If he wrung an unwilling assent from you when you were ill, it was a mean and cowardly

thing of him to do; it was taking advantage of your gratitude and gentle womanly feeling in a way that makes me think not too highly of him. The thing is simple enough. Tell him you find you can't marry him, as you love me. You *do* love me, don't you, Cecil?»

Cecil was prompt with assurances to the effect of his being »the only man she had ever loved.« Her feeling for »poor George« had been something quite different. She rather thought it had been respect which she had felt for the husband of her youth.

»Well, then, will you promise me to clear the matter up with Stapylton to-day? You must promise me this. You shall promise me—you will promise me if you love me.«

Frank Stapylton was coming towards them again; she had no time to lose, and as her one object was to get out of the difficulty for the present, she gave him the promise he asked for, and gave it fervently.

»Your mind may be relieved, Cecil,« Frank Stapylton said, carelessly, as he rejoined them; »Mrs. Arthur Waldron has not fallen into the river, nor has she fallen a prey to any of the wild beasts with which you seemed suddenly to think these woods are infested.«

»I'm very glad. Still, I'm sure I heard something; and it was so good and kind of you to go. I'm tired, and must go home now. Shall I say good-bye to you here, or will you walk up to the house with me?«

Both men declared their intention of walking

back to the house with her; but at the door Mr. Danvers took his leave. »I shall see you to-morrow,« he said to Cecil, and Frank writhed under the glance that accompanied the words. Then they went in together, and Frank commenced at once.

»Cecil, what does all this mean? Be frank with me, if you can.«

CHAPTER XX.

A NET IS SPREAD FOR GILBERT.

»BE frank with me if you can,« Frank said; and the fact of his saying it at all is conclusive evidence that he had utterly failed in gauging the depths of his future wife's character. It was not in Cecil's power to be frank with any human being, if by being frank she ran the risk of plunging herself into even the slightest temporary trouble. She infinitely preferred uttering an easy lie. The lie might or might not gain credence from the one for whom it was designed, but, at any rate, it rarely failed to stop conversation on the disagreeable point. The game was well worth the candle, in her estimation. What, indeed, did a lie more or less matter to a woman who habitually uttered them.

So now, when Frank Stapylton made the plea that was reasonable enough in seeming, and ridiculously wild in fact, she weaved a romance on the spot.

»I hardly understand it myself, Frank, Mr. Danvers has something on his mind, I'm afraid, and I think that he wants to tell me about it. Do you know, I can't help associating it with Mrs. Arthur Waldron, your immaculate Horatia. He

turned quite pale to-day when he caught sight of her first, and his manner changed from that time—quite changed, I assure you.«

»I don't wonder at that,« he was beginning, coldly, when she interrupted him tremulously.

»Frank, I wish you would not assume that air of mysterious annoyance. You are ready enough to talk about my brain, and to imply that every suggestion I make is the emanation of an unhealthy brain. I wish you would bear in mind what that poor brain has endured, and not torture it by suspense and an air of mystery.«

»I won't keep you in suspense, and there shall be no mystery in my dealings with you, at any rate, Cecil,« he said, more gently than he had hitherto spoken. »I don't like double dealing. I dislike it so much that I will tell you without hesitation that which it hurts me horribly to think about, much more to speak about. What can your feelings for me be, what can your thoughts of me be, when you can permit another man to kiss you?«

He asked it with a choking spasm in his throat—a spasm of righteous wrath, and indignation, and outraged, jealous feeling. And she answered him with an irritating calmness that did credit to her powers of artistic duplicity.

»Then Mrs. Arthur Waldron has, as I imagined she would, magnified and distorted an accident into an act of disloyalty to you——«

»Stop!« he said, passionately. »I saw it myself.«

»If you go into a rage and rave at me, it's quite impossible for me to give you the explanation,« she answered, carelessly. »I must submit, I suppose,

to a piece of broad and coarse injustice because you are too intemperate, and too much under the influence of a woman who dislikes me, to allow me to justify myself. I may look forward to a happy life indeed, if the rule is to be established that I am to submit to all accusations in silence.«

»I can't endure the idea of putting a woman—a woman who had promised to be my wife—on her defence in such a matter. Why didn't you trust me, Cecil? Why didn't you tell me you had come to love this man better than you do me? I would not have held you to your promise; I would not have enforced my claim an instant after it ceased to be a claim to which you acceded with all your heart.«

»Oh, what nonsense!« she cried, in accents of large-hearted impatience of the pettifogging nature of his complaint. »I haven't come to love Charles Danvers better than I do you; and I do accede to your claim with all my heart. Why should I be going to marry you if I didn't love you? Shall I gain so much by the marriage, Mr. Stapylton, that it would be worth my while to make myself miserable and take you, if it would make me happier to take Charlie Danvers?«

»All this only proves you an adept in the art of weaving spells,« he said; »but they are magical for me no longer. No, Cecil,«—she had risen up and was standing with her hands on his shoulders looking through his eyes into his soul with those wonderful violet eyes of hers, that were full of such witchery—»no Cecil; one of us two men—either Danvers or myself—must be made a fool of

by you in this business. I will not be the one.«

»You mean that you will break off our engagement—desert me—wrong me in your cowardice, in revenge for my rejection of you in our youth!«

»I mean nothing of the sort. I only mean to leave you free to go to the man you love,« he said, sadly, for she was very pretty, and it was for the »last time,« he told himself; and he was only a man, and it is horribly unpleasant for any man to have the conviction thrust home to him that he has been befooled.

And then he rose, and said »Good-bye« to her rather falteringly, bidding »God bless her« as he went, though in his heart of hearts he felt that she did not deserve the benediction, and was not in the least likely to benefit by it; while she, strong in a purpose she had formed, stronger still in the perfect knowledge she had of her own perfect beauty, said farewell to him with prettily portrayed resignation. As she held his hand in a parting clasp, she slipped a ring, with the word »Mizpah« engraved upon it, on his finger. And he was deeply touched by the incident; for how was he to know that she had a small stock of them, and had touched Charlie Danvers's heart by exactly the same means a few hours before? His mind was in a sadly complicated state as he went home from the Cecil who had been his, and was his no longer, this day; for, though he had arrived at a curing knowledge of some of her weaknesses, he had also arrived at a most consoling knowledge of his own.

An hour after he had left her, Cecil was at the Bridge House, sitting on a rolled-up bundle of carpet

that was, in the present disorganised state of affairs, the only moderately comfortable seat in the drawing-room. She had come down nominally to take a last farewell of Horatia; in reality she had come to goad that unhappy woman into reinstating her (Cecil) into her empire over Frank Stapylton's soul.

It was rather an effective narrative, that which she told of the events of the day; but Horatia was not dazzled by it. It was rather a strong case, that which she made out of her love for Frank, and her longing that he should think well of her; but Horatia was not deceived into sympathy by it. It was a subtle stroke, that which she gave when she said,

»You are so clever that you could make him see the folly of his resolve in a minute, but—I can hardly expect you to do it.«

»No,« Horatia said, thinking of that kiss by the river side; »you can hardly expect me to do it.«

»For you're fond of him yourself,« Cecil murmured softly; »and it would be cruel, cruel, and what no woman with womanly feeling could do, to drag you in as intercessor between him and the one he loves. Oh, Horatia, what a pity for his own sake, poor boy, that he couldn't care for you! Your desperate devotion would have satisfied him; but he will always be craving for more from me.«

It was a subtle stroke, and Horatia fell under it.

»I thought you said you had parted? What is the use, in that case, of thinking of what the effect might be of intercession for which you cannot ask? Moreover, my influence with Mr. Stapylton is very

slight, and could I use it after that scene between Mr. Danvers and you? I couldn't—I couldn't?»

»Nonsense, nonsense!« Cecil protested, warmly. »That scene, as you call it, was such an accident, it's cruel of you to aid in deepening the impression on Frank's mind; for I love him, and he adores me. He thinks Charlie Danvers kissed me; as if I would let any man but the one I'm going to marry do that? He was bending down to watch a trout, and I looked up suddenly, and I think my hat knocked against his, and all this harm, that may make the misery of my life, has been made of it! And you can't help me because you care for him yourself.«

»Care for him! Yes, of course I care for him—so much that I'll do anything to make him happy if I can, for he's like a brother to me,« she added, feebly. And then Cecil submitted a plan of reconciliation to her which was very beautiful in itself, if Frank could only be made to believe in its perfect integrity. And, spurred on by a dread which she dared not analyse, Horatia wrote a fervent appeal on behalf of Cecil and Cecil's pitifully helpless and besieged condition to Frank Stapylton.

»He knows what I am, «Cecil whimpered. »He knows that I can't bear to be rough, and rude, and repulse people. I'm too grateful to them for being kind to me; and so, because I can't be false to my nature—the nature he pretended not so very long ago he fell in love with—he's going to make me a bye-word and a scorn here, where I have been dragged through the mud already; and, of course,

I ought to bear it all in silence, because it's cruel of me to speak about it to you.«

»No, it's not; it's natural; and I'm very glad that you do,« Horatia answered, stung into mendacity, and chilled into coolness, »as Frank's friend and—a—yours. Don't you see I'm ready to do all in my power to remove the impression that you assure me is false?«

»Of course it is,« Cecil cried, eagerly. »Can't you see—doesn't your own reason tell you that it's all a mistake? Frank is the only man I have ever really loved; but he must not presume upon that fact; he must make some concession to show me that he cares as much for me as I do for him. I shall have been utterly deceived in his character, and you have helped to deceive me, if he does not do this.«

»I can have had no motive in deceiving you,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron said. »Heaven knows, I don't think that a marriage with you must prove such a blessing to a man that I should descend to a subterfuge in order to bring it about between you and a friend I care for.«

»No; that's it,« Cecil answered, whirling lightly round in her argument. »You care for him so much that even at the cost of his own happiness you would keep him to yourself, wouldn't you? I often think that he likes you best; he says himself his feeling of liking for you is very strong—only, you see, his feeling for me is stronger. It's a pity he ever saw me; he might have been contented with you if he hadn't, and so happy! Don't I trust you entirely? I can't do anything deceitful; it's

not my nature. I know you care for him, and yet I come and tell you everything, I trust you so.»

So she prattled on; and how grateful Mrs. Arthur Waldron was for the honour done to her by the fact of the prattler reposing such a full meed of confidence in her, may be better imagined than described. At any rate, as has been told, the forces brought to bear upon her by the weaker woman were sufficiently strong to induce her to use every agency she had at command for the furtherance of that weaker woman's wishes; and still she knew the whole time that there would be destruction for him in Cecil's love, and the possibility of a glorious salvation for him in her own, if it could ever be gratified; but that possibility was out of the question, and she knew herself to be an utter fool for even contemplating it.

But then, unluckily (in spite of all that reviewers may say—and they say a great many pungent things on the subject), women, and very nice and respectable women, too, are utter fools, and will continue to be utter fools as long as the world lasts. Accordingly, though she wrote the letter that was designed and destined to deprecate Frank's wrath against Cecil, she disliked writing it, and revolted against her part of dove with the olive branch with all the force of revolt that there was in her delicate nature against an utterly repugnant task.

In due time he received her letter, and his heart, or rather his taste, added to his jealous desire of possession, being already well inclined towards the woman whose cause was advocated in that letter,

he prepared to make concession to Cecil, and under certain conditions to claim her as his own again. »But she must give up fooling Danvers,« he told himself. With pardonable shortsightedness, he preferred to see things as he found it pleasant to see them. With a pardonable craving to give a euphemistic reading of the fact, he preferred calling it Cecil's »fooling Danvers« to »Cecil's fooling *with* Danvers.« But in the inmost recesses of his heart he knew that he was paltering with the truth.

Horatia's letter gave him some grounds to go upon; and he was very glad to venture upon those grounds at once. He told himself that Horatia was a clever, true, keen-sighted woman—a woman who was quite as much his friend as Cecils—rather more his friend than Cecil's in fact, and so not at all likely to be prejudiced in favour of that faulty but bewitching person. It behoved him to pay attention to Horatia's arguments, therefore, and to soften his heart to her appeal on behalf of that sister-woman of hers whom she (Horatia) despised, and disliked, and distrusted. Cecil's cause must be very good indeed, he argued, when even her rival became her special counsel and pleader.

That she had conquered them both by subtlety—and by subtlety in which there was a strong element of cruelty, was a truth which Cecil did not attempt for an instant to deny to herself, when Frank presented himself before her in an obedient sort of way, that made her comprehend that he did it partially at the bidding of her cat's-paw Horatia; and at the same time, though she was proud of her subtle conquest, she hated them both

for showing her that they had been made subservient to her will through their liking for each other—through that, and not through the blind and mad devotion to herself which she desired to develop on all sides.

We all know that a relapse is very much worse than an original attack. Frank bent lower, crawled more abjectly, wore his blue ribbon more openly in the eyes of all men, for a little after that coming back to Cecil in which Horatia had been mainly instrumental. Nevertheless though he did these things, he disliked doing them, and she dived to the very bottom of that dislike, and knew that it had its source in a sense of her unworthiness. »And he has gained his knowledge of that through another,« she told herself bitterly, and in idiomatic English she promised herself that he »should smart for it.« For though he bent lower, and crawled abjectly, and let her lead him along, the day of his credulity was over, and the faith he had had in her had fallen away for ever.

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»Come and keep my house, dear,« Gilbert Denham had said to his sister one day when she had summoned him to her lodgings, in order to consult him about her future residence. «Come and keep my house, dear, until you can find one you like better. Mine is a very lonely life, Horry; you and your children will make it much pleasanter, and keep me from going to the dogs.»

»You'll never do that, Gilbert?« his sister had asked, anxiously; for in spite of her loving predis-

position to believe her brother incapable of erring deeply—or at all, in fact—she could not help seeing that there were lines in his face which time had not traced, and shadows in his eyes which had not been deepened by Bessie's death.

»Well, I don't know,« he answered; »I have had one or two hard knocks lately; and whether a fellow has any heart or not, he has something within him that gets sore and hardened. You had better come and look after me.«

She felt that he meant them when he said these words; and as she believed in him, and in herself, and in her power over him, she accepted his invitation, and put herself to the extreme misery of trying to regulate the conduct of her riotous children in another person's house; not that Gilbert ever pointed this misery for her; he appeared to be utterly oblivious of whether the children made a noise or not. But his housekeeper had nerves, and disliked intruders, and was altogether very severe in her master's service.

One day when this latter fact had been brought very prominently before Horatia for many hours, she pondered over it deeply, and the result of her pondering was that she said to her brother after dinner,

»Gilbert, I can't help hoping that in time you will marry again. I shall rejoice when you say to me you have seen a woman you can love.«

»I have seen one already,« he said.

»Where?« She could not control the quick, conscious anxiety which manifested itself in that one word.

»At Larpington, last Christmas. Probably you'll think me a fool for it, or for confessing it; but the fact is, I was more interested in Mrs. Waldron than I have ever been in any woman I've ever seen.«

»And she's so unworthy of interest, or love, or anything of the sort,« Horatia said, emphatically; and then she went on to tell her brother a few episodes in the life of the beautiful Cecil since she had recovered her senses.

»Such conduct is enough to cure any man of even liking her, isn't it, Gilbert?« she asked, injudiciously, like a woman.

And like a man he agreed with her that such »conduct was enough to cure any man;« but he felt within himself, at the same time, that it had not cured him.

»Neither of those fellows can hold her. How should they be able to do it?« he asked himself, contemptuously; and he flattered himself into the belief that she would have behaved very differently if he could have won her before Frank Stapylton had intervened.

There was a dead calm for the brother and sister for a month or two, during which time they grew very closely to one another, and sympathised about everything but the interests that were dearest to each in life, namely, her love for Frank, and his for Cecil. Of course, the brother thought the sister foolish for entertaining anything like gentle feelings towards a man who had been guilty of the despicable act of cutting him (the brother) out;

while as for Horatia, she could only excuse Gilbert's infatuation by saying to herself.

»But if she could beguile Frank, it's only natural that other men should fall a prey to her.«

But the end of the period of quiet came, most unexpectedly. Disturbed and startled by the commencement of a letter she received one morning by the early post, she forthwith instantly disturbed and startled her brother, before she had mastered its contents.

»Oh, Gilbert, how can they do it? I hear from Cecil that they are going to be married directly almost, and are coming here.«

»Coming here!« he repeated after her; and his bronzed face grew pale with the chalky pallor which is so unpleasant to witness. »How *he* loves the lovely fool, too!« his sister thought, bitterly.

»Yes; stop a minute, though. No; she wants to come here (heartless of her!) before she's married, that I may help her to get her *trousseau*, Gilbert. I won't have her, don't fear.«

Does the man live who ever voluntarily puts himself out of temptation, I wonder? His heart beat with the quick pulsations of a most foolish joy, as he heard and answered,

»Not have her here! Why not, Horry? Where should she go, poor girl, but to you at such a time as this? Let her come here, of course. I'll welcome her gladly.«

»But, Gilbert, he'll come to see her, you know,« Horatia explained; »and it will be so uncomfortable, for we shall be called upon to help to adjust the differences that are sure to arise between such a

fool as Cecil is, and any man who is unhappy enough to like her.«

»I call that a most unwomanly sentiment,« Gilbert said, hotly, perfectly unconscious of the fact of its being the most womanly sentiment to which his sister could have given vent. »You can easily make him understand that it will be rather bad form his coming here—much—while she's here with us; and—and—Horry, make her as happy as you can, won't you?«

»Oh, you deluded mortal!« Horatia thought, shaking her head pitifully as he went out of the room, after administering this wholesome rebuke to her; »why can't you see her as even Frank sees her? Make her as happy as I can, you say! She will make herself happy, or unhappy, as it pleases her. Why, she would stand on my throat and suffocate me at any given moment, if it made her a prettier height in the eyes of men.«

But though this was her private opinion, she refrained from expressing it openly; and so, when Cecil arrived, she had such a reception as satisfied all her delicate tastes and requirements. And at dinner that day she arrived, for the first time, at a knowledge of what a distinguished-looking man Horatia's brother was.

The insatiable creature began lamenting at once that she had not »made more of Horatia« in the old days at Larpington. »She would have been so useful to me now,« she thought. »Frank is not here, and there's no one else in the way. Why, if I had only managed properly, I might have got upon quite fraternal terms with Gilbert Denham.

Well, my *trousseau* won't be got in a hurry, that is certain.»

She spoke the prologue to the comedy she intended to act that same night. Lounging back among the cushions of a stout, comfortable sofa, her beautiful, supple form, robed in soft-coloured maize silk, only a tone or two less golden than her hair, she looked such a perfectly harmonious creature, that he would have been more or less than man if he had resisted her invitation to come and «fan away her headache.»

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CHAIN GROWS LOOSE IN EVERY LINK.

»Do you believe in suddenly-formed friendships?« Cecil began, holding her face up caressingly towards the fan which he was waving before her. »I do. I know at once, directly I see a person, if I shall like that person, and if he is worthy to be liked. I felt that I could trust you the instant I saw you. What did you feel when you first saw me?«

It was a difficult question to answer at all. It was impossible to answer it truth-fully. Had Gilbert Denham been veracious at this moment, he would have been guilty of perfidy towards the absent Frank. Accordingly, he took refuge in that poor, weak sanctuary, evasion.

»I'm not good at defining passing impressions,« he said as coolly as he could with those intensely violet eyes bent beseechingly upon him; »and I am not a woman, and do not arrive at things by intuition. You're quite right, though, in feeling that you can trust me; you may, thoroughly.«

»I have never had a friend before,« she murmured, plaintively. »Girlish alliances mean nothing, do they? Then I married young, and after that——« She paused, and filled the silence with a sigh.

»I should have thought, to quote the old song, that

» 'Friends in all the aged you'd meet,
And lovers in the young.' «

He tried to say it with that air of light, affected gallantry which invariably fails to touch a sensitive woman, and he could not succeed in his attempt. He said it, instead, with that thrill of truth in his tone which goes home, as only truth can, to the heart of even a shallow nature such as Cecil's.

»Shorn of his strength already,« she thought, delightedly; and she bent her head down lower, and seemed to blush. The women to whose cheeks vanity drives the blood, always get the credit for being possessed by a sweeter spirit of modesty than those are accredited with who only blush from love.

»Shorn of his strength already!« the beautiful, mediocre-minded, modern Dalilah thought; and then she glanced at his sister sitting by, and saw that his sister looked contemptuously displeased, and went on her way rejoicing.

»Lovers, for some reason or other, I have had in abundance, but never a real friend such as you'll be to me, Mr. Denham. Any number of men have professed to like me, but I have always been ready, too ready, to distrust them. Now, you don't even profess to like me; but you do, don't you? Yes; I feel that you do.«

»Not like her! In Heaven's name, what would she have me say?« he asked himself. »With her honest, sweet nature, she can never wish to wrest

idle confessions from a man that will pain him in the making, and merely win absolution from her.« Then he went on attributing many beautifully refined feelings to her which she did not possess; not speaking his thoughts aloud—had he done so, the mere wording of the belief might have shown him that his faith was not founded on a rock—but letting himself think it until he loved the thought that did her honour.

Through all time, probably, this great problem will remain unsolved. Why will men go on giving their worthiest affections to the unworthiest objects that are thrown in their way? Propinquity has a great deal to do with it; but the fact of its being an element in the affair does not solve the question satisfactorily. We can only leave it as we find it. Since the world began, worth has failed to win the best love of either man or woman.

Some of these thoughts rushed through Horatia Waldron's mind as she sat silently watching the graceful spider weaving her web, and the honest, foolish, deluded fly fluttering towards it. Her feminine instincts told her that Cecil was resolved upon winning a declaration of love from Gilbert Denham; that she was determined to have his scalp; that she felt her power, and meant to have it. But more than this, Horatia's feminine instincts failed to tell her. In Cecil's suddenly-born desire to conquer Gilbert, Gilbert's sister could not clearly read a motive that might even partially justify the woman who seemed to feign to love all she looked on. »If she is weary of Frank, she must be as devoid of feeling as she is of sense,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron

thought; and though she sighed to see Frank free, she revolted indignantly at the possibility of his gaining his freedom through another woman's non-appreciation of him.

Presently she spoke, being determined, even at the cost of a pang to herself, to recall Cecil to a sense of decent remembrance of Frank.

»When will Mr. Stapylton be here, Cecil? Do you expect him to-morrow?»

»To morrow! Good gracious, no!« Cecil answered, with pettish emphasis. »What a bore he would develop into after we were married, if he followed me up so closely now! I didn't ask him when he was coming; but I don't expect him for a week, at least.«

»Certainty strikes the death-blow to sentiment very often, I have heard,« Horatia said, coldly.

»Sentiment!« Cecil echoed, half contemptuously. »There never has been any sentiment in my feeling for Frank. He's a good fellow, and a clever fellow, and he has been faithful to me for so many years; but when you talk of sentiment, you talk of something I don't feel for him.«

She roused herself up to say this, directing lightning glances towards Gilbert as she said it. And Gilbert (»men are such fools in such matters,« his sister thought) looked pleased.

»Stapylton's a happy fellow to have won your esteem,« he said, awkwardly. »A man to whom that is rendered up freely, is a man to be envied.«

»And you, in ordinary matters, are so clear-sighted and sensible,« Horatia thought. »But one look in her face blurs all your vision; one foolish,

false sentence from her swamps all your common sense. Why doesn't your manliness revolt at the perfidy which is making her disparage her future husband to you?»

Poor, foolish questioner! As if the manliness of the manliest on earth ever revolted at light mention of a rival from the lips that he loved!

»And yet, when I think how cold life is without sentiment to warm it, I feel that poor Frank is to be pitied,« she went on, vaingloriously. »Don't you agree with me, Horatia, in thinking——« She paused, for it dawned upon her that Horatia was gone, and that she was alone with Gilbert Denham.

A slight flush of excitement rose to her cheek. That he was weak about her already, she knew; but why should he not confess his weakness, and make her triumph complete?

»A poor triumph enough,« it may be argued. Granted. A very, very poor triumph; but, then, a grand triumph can never be achieved by a mean nature. And, on the other hand, as all things are relative, it must be conceded that these feminine victories are not utterly despicable. They are evidences of our power, poor as they may be, and poor as our power may be. And when one considers how utterly powerless a woman becomes from the day of her marriage, who can marvel at her struggles to develop the attribute as fully as she can before she goes into bondage?

Doubtless there is a faint foreshadowing of the powerlessness that will be her portion as soon as she has gained the hallowed name of wife, in every woman's heart. But on the girl's future the

shadow is limned forth faintly and weakly. The touches are put in by intuition only, and are often obliterated by hope; but the woman who has been once married knows that though she may shut her eyes to the fact, the fact remains—the man she is going to marry will be her master, and according to the strength or the weakness of his nature will he display the mastery over her.

Cecil Waldron was essentially a non-reasoning creature; but she was a woman, and therefore had subtle intuitions which were usually correct. The wisest woman on earth could not have been more thoroughly convinced of the truth of the presentiment she had, that on the day of her marriage with Frank her wings would be clipped, than this will-o'-the-wisp-minded creature was; but being so thoroughly convinced of it, probably a wiser woman would have drawn back, even at the eleventh hour, had she objected to such clipping. Cecil had no definite intention of drawing back, but she determined to gather all the roses that grew about her path openly before her marriage, surreptitiously afterwards.

Oh, the pity of it for honest-hearted Frank Stapylton! There was no protection for him in his own loyal nature against such a woman as this. The men who are fractiously jealous, wearifully masterful, bent on the exalted task of continually supervising and directing the footsteps of the woman they have vowed to trust—these men deserve to be deceived; and there is broad injustice in the fact that as a rule these are the men whose wives are far too good to deceive them; while the men

who are too strong and too generous to make a woman feel that she has the bit in her mouth every minute, reap the rich reward of their generosity and strength by getting such spouses as Cecil.

»I think,« Cecil commenced, in touching accents of plaintive regret, as soon as the opportunity of solitude was given to her; »I think there must be something very bad about me, Mr. Denham—some strong taint of original sin, that good people detect and revolt from at once.«

»Something bad!« he exclaimed, indignantly. »Don't pain me by being so horribly unjust to yourself, even in jest.«

»But I am in earnest, in sad, terrible, bitter earnest.« She had pre-arranged this speech, and was determined to utter it in season or out of season. »Your sister is a courteous woman generally, and quite a woman of the world; yet both her courtesy and her worldly tact give way when she sees any one she likes show any preference for me. She was hurt and angry about Frank Stapylton; now she is hurt and angry because she sees that I crave for your friendship. And if she is right, how very, very wrong and bad I must be!«

She let a tear or two well up into her eyes at this juncture, and Gilbert felt that all his strength would be weakness soon unless he could get away. At the same moment he thought what a tight hand he would keep over this great enchantress should he ever be so blessed by fate as to have her for his own. Heaven knows she needed the curb enough, but so would he have decided on using it if she had been the quietest and straightest

goer in the world. As it happened, she was incapable of discerning these conflicting sentiments. Had she done so, even she would have loathed the idea of the possibility of becoming the wife of a man who desired to marry a woman he degraded by suspecting.

»It is only the womanly dislike to seeing another preferred to herself that is influencing Horry's manner—if her manner is not what it ought to be towards you,« he said, sacrificing his sister to his passion without compunction. »Do you crave for my friendship? I wish I could prove to your satisfaction that it was yours to command as you liked, long before you even desired it.«

»Ah! you can't tell how soon the desire for it was formed in my poor, weak mind,« she said, with a charming humility that almost imposed upon him as real. »It has passed before me like a vision that your friendship was mine. Was the vision unreal?«

»I am afraid that Stapyhton and you will find it a tedious reality. You'll be seeing a great deal more of me than you'll care to see,« he said, in an affectedly light tone.

»I can't answer for him, but I can for myself,« she said, in a low voice. And then she rose and said, »Good night« to him, pleading fatigue as an excuse for retiring so early. She knew when to stop before satiety set in.

There was some light fencing gone through between the two widows this night before they parted. Cecil was gifted with the graceful, chameleon-like quality of changing her colours at any given

moment, and so, as soon as she had left Gilbert, she developed a warm, roseate tint of satisfaction in the friendship of Gilbert's sister.

»Do come and talk to me in my room, Horatia,« she pleaded, as she invaded Horatia in a pet sanctuary into which the latter had retired to commune with herself on the subject of the weakness of men—an inexhaustible subject, about which the less is said the better, I think. »Do come and talk to me in my room. It is such a comfort to me to have you and—your brother to rely upon at this time. You'll counsel me, won't you?«

»What about?« Horatia asked, briefly and coldly. And Cecil poisoned some arrow-tips before she shot them at the woman whose friendship she solicited.

»About my marriage. It's an awful thing, isn't it, for a perfectly open, straight-forward woman like myself to let a man suppose that I'm marrying him loving him as much as he does me, when I don't?«

»I should call it acting a lie; but don't be guided by me,« Mrs. Arthur Waldron said, hastily.

»That's what I feel it to be; and yet he will break his heart if I break it off,« Cecil answered, watching the effect of her own words keenly.

»I wish—how I wish—he could have fallen in love with you instead.«

»That being an utter impossibility, we will not discuss it,« Horatia answered, in those stagnant tones which betray hopeless heart-pain, when hopeless heart-pain is felt. And then Cecil gave her sharpest thrust.

»Oh, Horatia, I see, I understand; and I can do nothing. I would give him up to you, and gladly, but he is so human, that he will not see what is best for him.«

Imagine the feelings of the woman to whom this was said. Imagine, if you can, the depth and breadth of the outrage that was thus gratuitously offered to her purity, her pride, and her love. But no one can imagine it who has not been stung to worse than death by such an affected renunciation of a love that is to the one more than life, and to the renouncer less than nothing. We may depict and realise mere murders of the body without having soiled our hands in human blood, but we must have been victims before we can realise such soul-murders as these.

She tried to think of her children—tried to think savingly of the poor little straws at which failing women always clutch when the waters of tribulation are rising up and threatening to overwhelm them. But the recollection of their utter inability to sympathise with her came upon her and thrust her back upon herself, upon her own strenght—which was gone.

She could not, to have saved her life, have spoken conventional words now; she could not, to have saved her life, have tried to turn into a joke that which was the most solemn earnest of her life; she could only let the thought that was in her heart fall from her lips in broken words that told her tormentor of her agony.

»Heaven forgive you, and help me if it can!«

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Mrs. Waldron slept the sleep of the just that night, a balmy conviction spreading itself over her slumbers that she had tied the hands of the only woman in the world of whom she was afraid. »However much I may go on with Gilbert now,« she thought, as she bound her yellow hair round her shapely head the next morning, »Horatia won't dare to strike the note of discord should Frank appear out of season. I wonder if she suspects that he likes her. If she does, half my triumph over her is marred, when she has time to think.«

She planned out her day before she went down. She would indicate that she wished for a quiet walk in Kensington Gardens, and by a droop of her lashes she would inform Gilbert Denham that he might be her companion; and once under green trees—well, Gilbert Denham would be more than man if he refrained from telling her whatever she desired to hear.

So soon as breakfast was over, the pretty woman made herself prettier than ever in a walking costume, and managed to make Gilbert understand that he was to be her escort, and Horatia was left to her household cares and the contemplation of the injustice of all things for an hour in solitude.

At the end of that hour an impatient hansom drove up to, and an impatient knock resounded at, the door; and handsome Frank Stapylton was ushered in, looking eager and expectant.

»You are but just too late to have joined Cecil in her walk,« she said, as collectedly as she could, for her mind was in a turmoil. And there

was nothing but satisfaction with things as they were in his reply.

»Never mind; it's so long since I have had a word with you that I'm delighted to find you alone.«

»This early devotion will be surprising, even to Cecil, accustomed as she is to be the object of it,« she answered, resolutely. »She told me yesterday that she didn't expect you yet awhile, but the devotee cannot be kept from the shrine.«

»The devotee in this case has been kept from his shrine far too long,« he muttered. And then he drew back with the air of a man who felt he had been overstepping the bounds of prudence; and Horatia knew that the onus of maintaining ease at this interview was laid upon her.

»I'm glad to hear, Frank, that the brief time you have been absent from the woman you are going to marry seems long to you. I'm more and more convinced that the feeling of entire devotion is the *one* feeling necessary, if you would make a happy marriage. It is the needful feeling——«

»And Cecil has not inspired it in me,« he interrupted. »I have come to talk to you as a friend, Horatia. I have come to make a confession, before the greatest error I've ever been guilty of in my life is indissolubly consummated.«

»Make it to any one but me—to any one on earth but me,« she pleaded, ardently. And his answer was—

»You owe it to me to listen. If you refuse, my faith in all womankind will be shaken.«

CHAPTER XXII.

»SO SLIGHT A THING.«

»HOWEVER much you may wish that I should marry Cecil,« Frank began, probing Horatia's feelings, as woman's feelings are perpetually being probed for the gratification of man's selfish vanity—»however much you may wish that I should marry Cecil, you'll hardly advise me to be so rash, I fancy, when you have heard what I have to say.«

»You ought to say it to her, not to me,« Horatia protested.

»If I did it might drive her mad with mortification; she shall hear what has happened from the other side.«

»What do you mean by the other side? Why speak in parables?« she remonstrated.

»She has perpetrated the stalest stage trick, and blundered in doing it,« he said, scornfully; »the most effete of dramatists would hesitate about introducing such an episode into his maiden piece, even. She has put a letter that was destined for another man into an envelope that was addressed to me, and probably he finds himself the recipient of all the ardent expressions of affection she feels called upon to lavish on me in writing.«

»And you can speak of this mockingly?« she asked, sadly. »O, Frank! I pity you so much?«

»What for?« he asked, in manly wonderment at the pathetic veracity there was in her tone. Frank was only a man, therefore utterly incapable of looking round two or three corners when treading the mazes of such delicate ground. It never occurred to him that it was natural for the woman who loved him, to really pity him for being deceived by the woman he loved.

»What for?« she repeated, with magnificent amazement at his inability to grasp the subject, and hold it up in the full light, and see it as her clearer vision saw it. »What for? Why, Frank, poor fellow, you must be shamed through all your nature, to have loved so slight a thing, if she has written to that other man as you would not have had her write.«

»Yes, I have been done most horribly,« he answered, meditatively, »and I acknowledge that I feel sore and savage; but I wish you to believe me when I tell you it is only a wound to my vanity. My heart, if I have one, is not hurt by Cecil's conduct; I'm thankful to be free of her——«

»Frank,« she cried out, »for heaven's sake respect the memory of your dead love, however violently that love has been killed.« And then he rose up and went and stood before her, and dared his fate.

»Horatia, I won't ask for the boon at your hands immediately, or soon even, but by-and-bye when time has effaced, partially, at least, from your mind the shadow of the untrustworthy love I have had for Cecil——«

»Time never will give back the love you have wasted on her,« she interrupted, passionately.

»Without doubt you will recover the blow she has given; but the heart you could offer to another, how cold it would be! I could not live with such knowledge as I have of your past, oppressing my heart and my brain. We will still be the best of friends, Frank; but I will not burden my life with the ten thousand doubts and cares and the miseries of a lightly-loved wife.«

She passed from the room as she spoke, and he stood still, startled and pleased, recalling each phase of that passionate mood, which betrayed that she loved him already.

»She has been the right one all through,« he assured himself,« the other has been all phantasy and glamour.«

The breeze was sweet and low in Kensington Gardens this day. Faint fragrance from far-off boxes of mignonette was borne upon it, telling pretty tales of carefully-tended window-gardens, and flower-laden balconies in the squares and streets contingent to this crowning glory of the western suburbs—the glorious green trees and sward that lie like an Emerald Isle between Bayswater and Kensington.

Along one of the velvet-turfed alleys, under a leafy canopy, that did away with the heat of the sun-beams, and added to their beauty as they broke through and fell flickeringly in her pleasant path, Cecil Waldron sauntered along, enjoying the present—enjoying it with a thorough abandonment to such delights as it was affording her, as is rarely found in the purely English nature. For all her fair Saxon beauty, there must have been a touch of

Southern sensuousness in the woman who could so entirely cut herself off from the contemplations of both past and future, as she was doing now.

The conditions that were essential for this isolation of herself from all that had gone before, and all that might come after, were not of extreme rarity. A pleasant warmth in the atmosphere, a golden radiance in the sky, the knowledge that she was dressed to perfection, and the conviction that a man who had not done so before was on the brink of allowing himself to be the victim of her bow and spear—these were the sole conditions she demanded, and she had them now.

It was in this woman's nature to turn away as carelessly from the human creature who had but just before excited her keenest interest, as a child does from the air-ball it has burst, the air-ball that was so beautiful and bewitching at thing before it was broken. The pleasure of the present moment was the one thing that she craved for. And her way of throwing herself heartily into the present without even giving a tender thought to anything else, won for her a far larger meed of confidence from her current companions, than those women can ever gain who have consciences sufficiently tender to be retrospective, and hearts sufficiently warm to be prophetic.

How was he to know that this game which she was playing with such consummate grace and skill she had played with Frank Stapylton and Danvers without ceasing during the last few months? Practice had made her so very perfect that it never occurred to him that she had been trying her 'prentice hand

on others. For there were no harsh angles, no cruel hard lines, no coarse patches of over-warm colouring in the manner of her flirtation. He floated »gently o'er a perfumed sea« of danger, without a rock, a beacon, or a cloud to warn him of his peril.

Gradually, cautiously as they insensibly grew more intimate and at ease, she approached the subject of Horatia's reserve towards herself, and the possible cause of it. »Dare I tell you what I think?« she questioned; »dare I tell you how doubly unfortunate I am?«

»You wrong yourself by believing either that you are disliked by her, or that you can suppose she has a shadow of a cause for disliking you. You're over sensitive.«

»I know that I am that,« she answered, with delightful readiness, »but my sensitiveness rarely leads me astray; and I am not angry with her for entertaining feelings of dislike to me. Poor thing! she can't help them; she will never know, perhaps, how willingly I would have had things as she wishes; she will never know that what would add to her happiness would also add to mine.«

She said these words in her softest voice, said them with her violet eyes shaded by tremulous lashes, and with the faint rose-tint flushing her face. And the manner of her speech shook him sorely, and made him curse the honourable bonds that kept her from him.

Still he restrained himself, and suffered silence to reign, and she was compelled to own to herself, with something like admiration, that he was less

weak than she had thought him. But a demon of vanity whispered to her that to leave things as they were now would be to own herself defeated. And the day was so warm and sunny, and what was the worth of all the warmth and sunshine without love?

»Don't be angry with me,« she resumed, imploringly; »but I am such a sympathetic woman, that I *must* speak. I can't maintain cool indifferent silence when I see things going all wrong. Horatia would have been such a devoted wife to Frank, and she's so clever, that if she could have once gained it, she would have kept his heart.«

He was a clever man, but he no more detected the underlying cruelty of her remark than a fool would have done. Even a dog would have ceased wagging his honest tail if he had heard the stealthiness which crept into her tones. But Gilbert Denham was a man in love.

»How generous you are!« he exclaimed; »you can speak of the possibility of resigning a man you love, to a woman whom you think distrusts you. Heaven forgive him if he does not value you as you deserve to be valued.«

»I think Frank does that,« Cecil thought to herself, with a certain sly humour in which she was not deficient. Then she said aloud in a spasmodic way as if the truth were being wrested from her, which it was not—

»Resign a man I love! No, no, no; not even to a sister.«

He was a boy in her hands for all his years of seniority—a slave, a fool! There was something

pitiful even she felt, in the way he suffered her to wield him.

»You shouldn't say such things to me if you don't mean them; they madden a man, and you would resent the promptings of madness, and hurl me down to such depths as my presumption deserves. Cecil, you shouldn't do it.«

They had come close up to the Kensington end of the Row by this time, and she was turning her head away from him as he stood by the rails, feigning so sweetly to be embarrassed by his words. Watching so keenly for the appearance of one gallant rider whom she knew to be an *habitué* of this place.

»What a bright scene! to flower of the land,« she exclaimed presently. »Pick out the prettiest woman, and the handsomest horse, Mr. Denham.«

«An impossible thing to do,« he answered, as group after group trooped by. »There's a woman who looks like riding, on that slippery-looking chestnut; she has a rattling good seat, too, or that would have shaken her.«

He pointed with his cane as he spoke towards a lady who was coming down from the Kensington end of the Row, close along by the railings against which Cecil and himself were standing. She was unattended, either by cavalier or groom, and there was something marked about her costume, quiet as it was. A dead black cloth habit, unrelieved by either braid or button, contrasted strongly and strikingly with the glossy golden chestnut coat of the horse that carried her. Her hat was of dull felt. Her veil was of thick black gauze. »She looks

a terrible woman to me, however well she may ride,» Cecil said, as the woman on the chestnut approached them, holding her nervous, excitable horse down with firm, steady hands. And as she turned her face to them with an air of dogged defiance of their worst opinion, they looked in questioning wonderment, one to the other, as they saw her to be Emmeline Vicary.

He felt so sorry for her. In spite of all that had gone before, he felt so sorry for the woman who would make a futile effort to triumph in her own abasement. He watched her pityingly as she rode along in that solitude to which she was self-condemned, and he saw a certain weariness, a certain hopeless renunciation of all attempts to seem happier than she was, that touched him infinitely.

»I'm sorry to see her here in this way,« he said, turning to his companion appealingly; he hoped that the beautiful true womanly feeling with which he accredited Cecil would come to the fore now, and manifest itself in a genuinely sympathetic speech about the woman who must have fallen low indeed before she could have climbed to this prominent height. And Cecil was not capable of responding to such an appeal, even in seeming, since she had nothing to gain by it.

»You surely never expected to see her here in any other way, did you?« she asked, contemptuously; »it's just the platform upon which an aspiring lady's-maid would alight. She never desired anything better, let me assure you. Why on earth should you delude yourself with the notion that she deserved something higher?«

If an ugly, unattractive, awkward woman had spoken thus, what a homily Gilbert Denham would have read himself on the elastic subject of the proverbial uncharitableness of women towards all womanly shortcomings. But she who spoke now was so very greatly gifted with all those glorious graces of body to which men are ever ready to subordinate their minds, that he felt it to be quite worth his while to appeal against her condemnatory dicta.

»You're so good and true yourself that you can't realise that a woman may step aside from the straight path, without designing to go utterly to the bad,« he said, haltingly. It shocked him that Cecil should be so evidently willing to resign a fellow-creature to the worst of worldly fates. And so he tried to make her attribute to her ignorance that which was entirely due to her jealous ill-nature.

She laughed viciously, and leant forward uneasily to watch, as the subject of their discourse wheeled her horse round lightly, and cantered up the opposite side of the Row. And Gilbert Denham ached as he saw that the feeling which was paramount in the breast of the woman by his side, was not one of pitiful shrinking, but a strong, bold, wicked hatred of the apparent success of the one who was making a subdued parade of her infamy.

»Shall we walk on?« he asked. There was the old fascination of repulsion for him about that black-habited rider of the skittish chestnut horse. But fascinating as it was, he shrunk from watching her progress. The sight of the woman alone, unattended,

was painful enough, but to see any light and easy claim made upon her powers of recognition would be harder still.

»Walk on! —no,« Cecil cried, querulously. »Look at her now, bowing, pulling up, claiming acquaintance with that man on the white horse, as if she had any more right to it than the mud under his feet! Look, look, *Gilbert*, and you pitied her just now!«

She turned an angry furrowed face towards him. She spoke out each word with harsh, thrilling emphasis. She became violently, terribly in earnest all at once, as she made a slight gesture towards the pair on whom her attention was fixed.

»Do come on, Mrs. Waldron,« Gilbert Denham pleaded. »It's a beautiful panorama this for five minutes, but after the expiration of five minutes it's only a delusively beautiful purgatory. Do come on!«

»Do look at the man on the white horse,« she cried out sharply. »See him by that black demon's side; *my* waiting-woman riding with *him*. Do you know that man?«

She turned and fronted him, her fair face whitened with passion, her violet eyes deepening with a cruel intensity that was painfully suggestive of madness.

»Do you know that man by her now? Don't you know that man?« she repeated; »it's Charlie Danvers, and it's an insult to me that he should notice her existence. Oh, Gilbert, Gilbert Denham, I must tell you he professes to love me.«

»And you have accepted his professions of love?«

»Yes—in a measure; you don't know how I'm

persecuted; I should die, I believe, if I didn't feel that I had you to turn to. What can it mean?»

She asked the question eagerly as the woman on the chestnut, and a man on a white Arab passed by. And Gilbert Denham's conscience whispered to him that the man on the white horse had found out the fascinating falsehood by his (Gilbert's) side.

»Let us go home; Horatia will be waiting luncheon for us,« he suggested.

»No; I won't go home until I have had a word with Charlie Danvers. Why, he came here to meet me; we expressly arranged that we should both be here to-day at this house; and now, see how he treats me! see it! see it!«

She was growing reckless in her wrath. She was throwing down her cards and making her plaint most openly, and still he would not quite condemn her. That the man about whom her anger was rife was treating her precisely as she deserved to be treated, Gilbert felt morally sure. But then justice should be tempered with mercy, and though he was beginning to find her out as so weak, he did not desire to see her weakness punished openly before the eyes of all men in this way.

»He can't know you are here,« he said, hurriedly; »and even if he did know it, Miss Vicary has held the position of a gentlewoman, don't you know? There's no insult offered, there's no insult intended; she's not sufficiently well versed in the ways of this wicked world to know that it's a reprehensible thing to ride unattended.«

»Well, if you're false enough to your real

feelings to say such things to me, I needn't combat the sentiment you defend,« she said bitterly. »He knows that I am here, he knows why I am here, he knows what that woman is, and he means me to understand that my reign is over, that I am a dethroned queen, that the light love of one woman is as good in his eyes as the love that seems light of—«

»Don't say a word now—don't say a word now,« he interrupted, confusedly, for it hurt him, for her sake, to feel how unadvisedly, how recklessly, she was exposing herself.

»Why shouldn't I say a word more?« she cried, imperiously; »there's nothing more to be lost—or gained. Do you think I value Frank's fealty or your paltry homage? I may be—*mad* to say it, but it's the truth, if Charles Danvers could persuade me that all this was a sham. I'd value it ten thousand times higher than anything I felt to be a reality from any one else. I like him—I like him; look at the way he looks at her, and ask yourself if I can stand it.«

She nervously opened and shut her parasol as she spoke, for the pair under discussion were nearing them rapidly, and the rider of the chestnut seemed to have her hands full, as far as regarded the management of her horse. The sleek, beautiful white Arab undulated along as if it hadn't a kick or a buck in it; but for all that apparent quiescence, there was a restless glance in its sweet eyes that spoke its own story of hardly suppressed power.

»The beautiful beast! doesn't it seem to suit

him?» she said, savagely. »Look at him laying his hand on that arching neck! Look at him nearing me and looking me in the face mockingly! Oh, Gilbert! has the end come?»

Culpable, evanescent as her feeling was for the man who was riding the white Arab, it was bitter to bear at this moment. She was a thorough woman in this that she yearned always to »reign and reign alone, and always give the law.« It absolutely hurt her to feel that her power was waning over any man's soul, lightly as she might have estimated the honour, while her empire lasted. That Charlie Danvers should give her the initiative, and show thus clearly and openly that he no longer had any »appetite for her proffered love,« stung her as she had never been stung before. For though she had never meant one of them, she had offered her vows to him freely, and now he had found her out, and was slighting her.

As he passed away out of their sight she made one valiant effort to seem the thing she was not—namely, unconcerned—now that, the first paroxysm of her fury having spent itself, she was aware that she had by her open expressions of wrathful, jealous disappointment weakened her cause with the man by her side. To be sure there was Frank, foolishly faithful, loyally-loving Frank, to fall back upon, even if all the others should prove defaulters. But there was no triumph in developing the loving fidelity of a man who was on the brink of pledging it to her publicly, and of legally binding her chains about himself. It would be terribly tame to be the recipient of Frank's love and homage only. It

would be painfully monotonous not to have any other man to turn to with the certain knowledge that the other man was aching at heart and soured in spirit on her account. Accordingly, Gilbert being the only man at hand who might be made to suffer in this way, she turned to him with all the subtle suavity of which she was mistress, and bent all her powers to the task of banishing the remembrance of her burst of jealous wrath from his mind.

»Quick with the tale, and ready with the lie,« she promptly compiled a pretty fable concerning the sisterly nature of her feelings for Charles Danvers, and the affectionate hopes she had been weak enough to nourish of seeing him married, by-and-bye, to a dear friend of her own. »I won't tell you her name, for she has seen and liked him, and I think there is nothing baser than one woman betraying the confidence of another,« she murmured, plaintively.

And though Gilbert felt convinced that the suddenly-mentioned friend was merely a creature of her own brain, he was touched for the moment by the tone of tenderness, and the enunciation of such sweet sentiments. To use his own graphic idiom, he had just had a thorough »eye-opener« about the lady by his side. But while it was close to him, the influence of her fair face was very potent.

She had nearly soothed away all unpleasant recollections of that scene in the Row by the time they reached home. Once more he was letting

himself be lulled into temporary oblivion upon the »perfumed« sea of unwise, unlawful love. And so it was with a queer admixture of pleasure and pain that he heard from his sister that Frank Stapyhton had come up to town to release Cecil from vows which she had already broken.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SELF RELEASED.

AFTER asking for Horatia's advice a score of times, and not taking it on a single point once, as is the manner of men, after altering his determination again and again as to the way in which he would convey to the woman who had deceived him the knowledge that he had discovered her duplicity—after, in fact, making a vast number of complex plans that cost him a great deal of trouble, Frank Stapylton came back to commonplace and common sense, and decided on writing a plain statement to Cecil, which was the obvious thing for him to have done at first.

The writing of the plain statement by a man to a woman who has been dear to him that he has discovered her to be a perfidious fool, must be an unpleasant task under any circumstances. It was doubly, desperately unpleasant to Frank. In the first place, there was the inevitable wrenching off of every tender association. And added to this there was that equally inevitable contiguity of theirs in the county, which would make it impossible for that perfect severing of every link between them which alone seemed tolerable to him now.

And there was something else which made his

task an unpalatable one. There was a dawning consciousness in the breast of this man who was as little of a hero as are the majority of men whom one meets in real life, there was a dawning consciousness in his breast that his own shield was a trifle dimmed. If Cecil had been deserving of his fullest love and most perfect faith, how would it have been about that feeling which intertwined itself so luxuriantly about the fabric of his friendship for Horatia, and made the fabric a far fairer thing than it would otherwise have been. In very truth he knew himself to be no Knight of Purity—he acknowledged with very little shame and no contrition at all that his faith had wavered from the hour he pledged it to Cecil, and that his love had strayed from the moment it had been her sole right.

Now this perfect knowledge of his own weakness, although he had no manner of shame and contrition about it, did fetter him for the performance of his task. She, the one whom he was openly going to cast out from her place in his heart, had erred deeply in daring to have a preference for another man, also in having been found out. But how about himself? it must be asked again. He, too, had dared to have a preference for another woman, and he had not been found out, though he had also dared to show that other woman that he felt it. His secret was enshrined in his own breast, and in the breast of one of the staunchest women in the world. Otherwise, his conscience would insist on putting the question—would he have been able to sit in the seat of the scornful, above Cecil, as he did in the present instance?

Nevertheless, »Two wrongs never make a right,« as he told himself re-assuringly. Man is more strongly subjected to temptation, is more liable to errors, and is, of course, to be more leniently judged on all occasions of his slipping and tumbling down by the rest of his fellow-sinners than woman is. This rule is too firmly established for it ever to be broken through in this world. Let us humbly hope, that if the Spiritualists' theory is correct, and the next is a »progressive« world, there will be a fair field and no favour shown between the two sexes when the everlasting race for rewards and punishments is run.

Meanwhile, the old order obtaineth, and Frank acted according to it—writing his letter of renunciation of Cecil in as strong a condemnatory spirit as he dared display to a woman he was releasing from his thrall. But in one respect he was very generous—generous in a way that many men are when called upon to commit the cruelty of showing women that they don't care for them any more.

»The statement that our engagement is at an end must go forth to the world at once,« he wrote; »but I entreat you to give it what colour you think best; let every one believe that yours has been the severing hand. I shall never contradict you.«

And then he sealed and sent it; and the thing was done.

Cecil had gone to her own room at once on her return from her saunter by the Row which had been the means of such mortification to her. She had gone at once to her own room, and com-

ported herself considerably by reclining in the easiest of easy chairs before a huge cheval glass, and contemplating the reflection of her own person in its attitude of gracefully indolent ease. After all, this morning's episode was only a temporary slur on the fair, shining surface of her general satisfaction. A man who had been her slave had probably heard something which had made him jealous—had scented another of her wild flirtations—and determined on being her slave no longer. Well! there were many more men in the world, and, as she really meant to marry Frank, Charles Danvers' claims might have developed into proportions of tedious, troublesome magnitude. It was all better as it was—only she did wish that her white elephant had rid her of himself in another way—and not in the presence of his possible successor in her favour.

She had refused to go down to luncheon, and Horatia, with that burden of Frank's visit and communication on her mind, had gladly kept away from her guest's chamber, and so now, late in the afternoon, that guest was still in ignorance of the other cloud that was arising—was still deriving half unconscious comfort from the thought that there was always Frank to fall back upon, and Gilbert to rely upon in the meantime.

»Half an hour in that flowery shady drawing-room will be delicious before dinner,« she thought, rousing herself up and setting about her toilette duties with a skill and whole-heartedness she had never displayed about duties of any other kind in the whole of her vain life. And very perfectly

she succeeded in them, was a verdict that any observer would have been compelled to give by-and-bye, when the soft gold colour silk dress fell in rich unstiffened folds about her. She understood the secret of harmonious colouring, this woman who understood so little else that was good. The colour of her dress was the same as her glorious golden hair, only a tone or two less bright. And the sheen on the ribbon that passed through that hair matched the wood-violet tint of her eyes exactly. She loitered about her room until seven, deferring going down until the half-hour bell rang, as she had no desire for a *tête à tête* with Horatia; but when this signal was given, she began her progress down with a little air. She determined to do away with any impression Gilbert might have of her passion and depression of the morning, and so she went out of her room with a sort of cheerful rush, and passed with a light true step along the corridor, singing as she went.

Singing out a bar or two of a melody that is always sweet in our ears, even if we hear it ground out by a barrel organ, or brayed out by a German band, a melody by means of which Louisa Pyne taught us how wondrous witching English words sang by an English tongue can be — »The power of Love.«

But Gilbert Denham hearing it distinctly as he did, »fetching« as he felt it to be, would not allow himself to be »fetched« by it on this occasion. He was not in his dressing-room as she had supposed. He was smoking a pipe leisurely, previous to dressing — smoking and blowing hazy

clouds of disbelief (around himself) in the integrity of women in general, and Mrs. Waldron in particular.

»I hear the voice of the charmer most distinctly,« he laughed to himself as he listened. »You're warbling very pleasantly, and yesterday I should have followed, believing both in you and your lay, you pretty liar?« he thought contemptuously, as he roused himself from his inert enjoyment of his pipe, and looking at his watch, saw that the hour had come for him to go and dress and dine. »You pretty liar! it seems almost cruel to have found you out.«

The exquisite balance of Horatia's system of household management had been upset this day, in consequence of that invasion upon her time and sympathies which Frank Stapylton had made in the morning. And so the cook had received her orders later, and the butcher had taken a mean advantage of the situation and declined to redeem the lost hour at the cost of extra speed on the part of his boy and horse, and the result was a course of unpunctuality during the day, culminating in the half-past seven o'clock dinner being unappetisingly undercooked at eight o'clock. A delay which allowed Cecil to receive Frank Stapylton's letter before the banquet for which she had prepared herself so bewilderingly.

She received it, and read it in the room that was »flowery and shady,« the room in which she had designed to carry out the captivation of Gilbert Denham, and as she read it some resolve, some desire, some determination seemed to give way within her. But she braced herself by a timely

recollection of the necessity for immediate action, and turned to take the arm that Mr. Denham offered her deferentially, with a bright, gleaming smile that would have seemed a funny thing even on the face of a satisfied woman.

»Poor thing! she's writhing under the remembrance of the blow she has had,« Gilbert thought, in his ignorance of the fact, that she had received that »worst blow,« and was carrying it in her pocket at the present moment.

Accordingly, assisted in their endeavours by a misunderstanding, they dined together very comfortably, Horatia aiding them unconsciously by her perfect ignorance of two upsetting facts, the first being that *rencontre* in the Row, the second the receipt of that letter from Frank. For fond as she was of the man herself, she would have assuredly tendered some mute, disabling sympathy to the woman he had surrendered, if she had known that the terms of the surrender were then in that woman's pocket.

Some subtle, undefinable essence of intelligence breathed through all of this, and made clear to Cecil that however much Horatia might know of Frank's mind, the knowledge of the worst that had befallen her (Cecil) was still to come. »And until she knows that he has found me out, and found me worthless, she will be very tolerant to me for his sake,« the frailbrained schemer thought as she reviewed the situation, and made an excellent dinner towards filling that situation properly. The old widely-accepted statement as to a woman in love having no appetite may be true or false; it is impossible to verify it. But there it not the faintest shadow of a

doubt about the fact of a woman who is feigning to be in love with several people simultaneously, needing a fair portion of good stimulating diet, and developing into a decidedly carnivorous creature. The occupation is exhaustive—to be alternately queen and slave in rapid succession to different people is fatiguing to the last degree. Cecil recognised the calls that would probably be made upon her, and strengthened herself to bear them to the best of her ability.

She realized, as soon as she had mastered the contents of the letter which had cost Frank so much trouble to word properly, to word with the discreet determination which was necessary, she realized at once, as soon as she had read this letter, that there was no appeal against its decision. Frank would never revoke it; would never be wax again to receive any impression which she might desire to give him. He had done with her, done with her definitely. At once through the darkness of the shadow cast over her pride, gleamed the encouraging light of a resolve to show him that he could be supplanted at a moment's notice.

Mrs. Arthur Waldron, constrained by the knowledge she had of Frank's fullypledged wrath, and by the miserable uncertainty she was in as to his but half-pledged intentions about Cecil, was utterly incapable of backing up the conversational efforts that Cecil made with flippant facility, and Gilbert responded to with convulsive zeal. There was something almost ghastly to Horatia in the fact that her guest and rival grew more sparkingly excited, more feverishly animated, more bewilderingly pretty

each moment. And how eagerly Gilbert watched her, too, watched her with an air of puzzled wondering admiration that startled his sister, and stirred the object of his watch up to more strenuous efforts.

She never relaxed these efforts to be amusing, to be bewitching for a minute until she and Horatia had got themselves away into the drawing-room alone; then she heaved a short passionate sigh of genuine fatigue, and flung herself on the sofa, her hands clasped together, tightly covering her tired gleaming eyes.

»Shall I sing if you're going to rest a little, Cecil?« Horatia asked. Infinitely more agreeable to her was the prospect of a little of her own music than more of Cecil's mirth, which had seemed to have a jarring strain in it. Therefore Mrs. Arthur accepted another short passionate sigh which burst from Cecil as a sign of acquiescence in her proposition, and so sat down, and sang resolutely through two or three songs until her brother joined them.

At his entrance Cecil took her hands away from her eyes, raised herself on her elbow, and called him to her side.

»Gilbert, Gilbert Denham,« she whispered softly, as he placed himself on a chair close to the head of the sofa, »I have passed hours in very serious thought since I came home from our walk this morning; do you care to hear what it has been about?«

There was a flickering impatience in her eyes that gave them an entirely new expression. There was

a bitterness in the movement of her hands and arms that, wildly graceful as it was, struck him painfully, suggesting as it did that she was over wrought either in body or mind.

»Don't you think it would be well for you to rest to-night instead of talking about anything that might possibly agitate you?« he replied, very gently. She was such a pretty woman that grievously as he had grown to distrust her, he could not help being gentle, almost tender, to her when she appealed to him in this way.

»Don't you care to hear what I've been thinking of, Gilbert?« she resumed, placing her hand on his arm, and gradually tightening her clasp in a way that involuntarily made him think of the detaining claws coming out with stealthy force from the velvet paw of a sweet-faced, cruel-hearted cat; »don't you care, after pretending to care for me so much?«

»My dear Mrs. Waldron ——« he was beginning, but she interrupted him impatiently—

»Call me Cecil; who has a better right to address me familiarly than you?«

»The man you're going to marry might object to it,« he said, as steadily as he could, under a swiftly-growing sense of there being danger in the air; »as to not caring to hear what you have been thinking about, I assure you I should be delighted to listen, if you didn't look so hopelessly tired.«

»The man I'm going to marry!« she repeated slowly; »I wonder who that man is!«

»Horry's right, then; there is a screw loose with that fellow Stapyhton,« Gilbert thought, and

rather to his own surprise he found that he had not the faintest desire to avail himself of the opportunity that would have seemed so golden a one to him a few days ago.

»Yes, I wonder who that man is,« she said, flinging her head back on the sofa cushion, and tossing her arms up in an arch above her crown of golden hair. »It's not Frank Stapylton, let me tell you that; I'm going to break off my engagement with him; I entered into it for gratitude, not love's sake; I'll be bound by it no longer. Gilbert, will you be glad that I do so?«

»If it adds to your happiness, yes,« he answered, gravely, and he had a hint of a coming storm in the fierce impatience with which she writhed up from her recumbent position, and confronted him.

»Disappointment, disappointment, nothing all my weary life but disappointment,« she cried out sharply. »Why did you men between you tear me from my living tomb when at least I had no memory one hour for the troubles of the hour before it? why did you between you wake my reason, and my heart, only to torture both? why——«

»Oh! Cecil, don't excite yourself to night when your'e so weary,« Horatia said, soothingly, coming and putting her cool hands on the hot, throbbing brow of the almost raving woman. But the soothing words, and soft sympathetic touch fell like oil on flames.

»Don't touch me, scorpion,« Cecil shrieked out; »you have taken one of them from me—you have poisoned his mind against me« (she pointed to

Gilbert as she spoke), »and all you have done will seem right, and all I have done will seem wrong——« She stopped herself suddenly, and then broke out into a hollow, pitiful laugh, and the brother and sister looked at each other with the drawing of the great dread that was in their minds, legibly written in their eyes.

And this was the dread that was soon to become a certainty, that the weak mind was wavering. Wavering under the influence of the strongest passion of which its owner was capable—a disappointed, thwarted vanity.

It was a terrible task that which was laid upon Gilbert Denham and his sister now. It was an awful responsibility. A ghastly onus. Each knew that every action respecting her was liable to misconstruction. Each felt that they were bound to work for her weal far more earnestly than if they had loved her well, and her sanity had been a desirable thing.

The relapse was not one of those gradual things that rack lookers-on with suspense. It came on with one of those shocks that stir up the sensibilities strongly at first, and then stultify them by the sheer force of exhaustion. It was appalling to see her mind going further and further astray every hour. It was crushing to Horatia to reflect on how very nearly one who was dear and precious to her had been entangled in the ruin of that mind. But the time came when the reaction against the power of these distracting reflections set in of necessity.

»She may recover after an interval,« was the

verdict eventually passed upon her case by the first medical authorities in matters of insanity. Meanwhile her property was taken charge of by agents who were legally appointed. A certain income for her benefit was paid to the head of the private asylum in which she was placed; and poor little Gerald's chances of succession to the Larpington estate faded away from the realms of probability again.

And during this perplexing period Frank Stapylton's position was a curious and rather harassing one. Publicly he was in the position still of the man who was pledged to become Cecil's husband. And though he knew, and quickly made Horatia comprehend that he was released from that pledge, still he could not proclaim it to the world at large, and the memory that it had existed erected itself as a barrier between himself and a closer intimacy with Horatia.

The power of the woman mad, in fact, was greater against them than the power of the woman sane had been. For they were perpetually remembering her, and with the perversity of reasoning creatures, unreasonably remembering what might have happened to her, and to them, if she had been utterly different to what she was. And these remembrances, although they were foolish and futile, had a very separating force about them; and so neither Mrs. Arthur Waldron nor Frank Stapylton felt much else beside a sense of immediate relief when all things concerning Cecil were settled, and they felt themselves free to part—with very vague notions as to whether they would ever meet again or not.

A few months passed away without there being any very material change in the condition of the two widows—any material change in their outward condition, that is to say. Cecil was rather more disordered in mind than heretofore, but she was equally beautiful, and all the arrangements for her physical comfort were equally perfect in their organisation. Horatia still kept her brother's house, and believed in the propriety of every other earthly right being rendered up to her children. But her mind was better ordered than of old. For good or ill (who can tell?) to her a change had come. She had outlived the romance of her life. She had not tried to kill it, but she had seen it die. And in watching its death she had not suffered such agony as makes a wound that may never be healed.

When I say that she had not tried to kill it, it must be distinctly understood that this statement has reference only to the time when it became a justifiable act on her part to let it live. She tried hard enough to strangle it, to crush it, to put it aside in any way, poor thing, while Cecil's apparent sanity rendered it a reprehensible thing. But afterwards she suffered its existence with patient, mute endurance. And when it might have grown and strengthened, it was an altogether new pain to her to see it fade away and die.

How the withering influences set in, why changes should have come, she could not tell. No jealous vision intervened on the one side, no higher ideal dazzled her on the other. She would have shrank from the thought of his being superseded

in her regard as from something soiling. She would have felt degraded in her own estimation if she had ever experienced the most passing twinges of regret or remorse, or mortification or annoyance for that she had unconsciously thrown a halo of romance over her sentiments towards him. She could bear that they should be forced into the full light of day if needs be, although she knew that they were those most harrowing of all the friends we have left behind us— »the feelings« of the past.

She turned to the contemplation of her own case, and studied it analytically, as though it had been the case of an interesting friend or enemy, and she could make out nothing about it. Here was no fresh interest introduced, no sort of satiety involved, no feminine vanity mixed up with the question. He had not wearied her, nor piqued her, nor had any other man put his light out. He had simply ceased to be the one paramount interest life held for her. And how had this come about?

She could not tell; it was impossible to tell! But indulging all this belief in the impossibility of accurately discerning and declaring the »reason why« this change had come, there ran a silver stream of suspicion of herself, which compelled her to seek for her own motives, for her own meaning, for her own »meanness« in short.

Of all the agonies which we are called upon to endure, perhaps this supreme one of leaving off a feeling that has given all the vitality to our existence for a given period, is the bitterest, the most

barren, the most unsatisfying, the most demoniacally tantalizing. I am not speaking now of those common cases in which one nail has been knocked out by another, in which jealousy has done battle with love in our souls, or in which a certain lightness of heart and shlightness of feeling has carried one away from the secure ground of »what ought to be« to the shifting sands of what »might perhaps be pleasanter.« I am not speaking now of these which are comparatively common cases. I am speaking of the far sharper pang a woman experiences who is by her nature compelled to »leave off« suddenly a liking or a love which has heretofore been like life to her, and who cannot even to herself assign a reason for doing so.

This sort of self-release is one that if we dared to tell the truth, we would gladly exchange for the harshest bondage love can impose upon us. For after we have achieved it, the world is apt to seem »nothing worth«—and what is worse even we are apt to regard the follies of the past, committed under such a much gentler *régime*, as so very inexcusable.

»Is it a phase?« one asks with anxiety. »Or is it the real, right, permanent feeling which ought to obtain with us; is it false, and is all the rest true?«

Echo feebly answers, »Is all the rest true?« but who can answer that question?

CHAPTER XXIV.

»LOVE IS ENOUGH.«

»Six months to-day since poor Cecil went to the asylum? By Jove! how time passes! It doesn't seem so long, does it, now?«

The speaker was Frank Stapylton, the time evening, the scene the river just above old Kingston Bridge.

He addressed his remarks to the company generally, and the company consisted of one other man one lady. The lady only answered it.

»Sometimes it seems like six years to me. That's when I think of all the changes in myself. At other times it only seems like six days. That's when I see how utterly unchanged all the people and conditions are about me.«

It was Horatia Waldron who made this response, lifting herself up from her cushioned seat, and resting her hand on the shoulders of the man who was pulling »bow«—her brother Gilbert.

»You see a change of colour here, at least, don't you?« Gilbert Denham said, turning round, lifting his cap off, and running his fingers through his hair. »I'm in the silver age thoroughly, Horry. I wasn't that six months ago, dear; yet you speak of the people about you being 'utterly unchanged.'«

»Perhaps I was thinking more of their hearts

than their heads, Gilbert,« she said, in a free, unthinking way; and then she remembered how much fire had gone out in her own heart, and how much feeling had veered about in Frank Stapylton's, and blushed the first blush that had coloured her cheeks connected with him for some weeks.

»Do you think there has been no change in the hearts of some of those about you then?« he cried, briskly, cutting into the conversation in a loud tone, as his honourable position of stroke demanded. »You haven't marked signs very closely, I'm afraid—in my case, for instance.«

She looked at him as he ceased speaking, and liked him so much! He would always have such a thoroughly good place in her estimation; but how could she ever have throbbed about him as she had done once? Or, rather, having so throbbed, how could she have grown so strangely still, and calm, and cold, as she was now?

She asked herself this question as he looked back at her with his old, unaltered, bright, frank smile; and she hated herself for having to ask it. He was the same; he was so essentially the same, that it shamed her to think that only the other day she had regarded him with such utterly different feelings. He was the same frank, fine, candid, impressionable, slightly selfish fellow, whose indifference had made her purgatory and whose interest had made her heaven but a short time ago; and now, though she *liked* him as well as ever, she found herself now and again attempting to give

herself a satisfactory reason why she ever loved him.

Presently the subject that was uppermost in the thoughts of each one of them this evening came to the fore, and insisted on being treated with open consideration.

»Our last hours in the Old World together, Horry!« her brother said, tenderly, turning round again to address his sister. »Will you think me worth following into the New, I wonder? Or will you wait here on a forlorn hope?«

»The chances are that I shall follow you,« she said, quietly. And then their stroke roused himself, and came lightly back to join them.

»You're not going to try and inveigle Mrs. Arthur across the herring-pond, are you, Gilbert?« he said, deprecatingly. »Putting every other consideration out of the question (if she wishes it to be so put), there is still the question of the succession to the Larpington estates to be watched over and settled. Poor Cecil is dying as fast as she can, they tell me, and she has never made a will.«

»If it's Gerald's it will come to him in time,« Horatia answered, cheerfully. »Meanwhile I shall do him more efficient service in trying to teach him to be self-reliant and self-dependent, than in thrusting my hand into a fire that scorched me to the point of disabling me once before. Besides, if I follow Gilbert—I don't say that I shall—but if I do, you'll remain here, and you'll always have a keen eye on my boy's interests, won't you, Frank?«

She said it with such heart-felt intensity of belief in him, that she felt taken down with a jerk when he answered—

»You don't think that I shall remain here if you and Gilbert go, do you?«

»To tell the truth, I had never thought of forming any plans for myself when Gilbert shall be gone, until he asked me just now if I 'thought him worth following.' As for you, Frank, why, of course, you'll remain here. Why should you go?«

»Because you do,« he said, abruptly. And then the two men fell to their work of pulling again, and the lady relapsed into silence, with a strong feeling that it would have been better if the subject had not been mooted at all. According to the best of her genuine belief, her sentiment for him had so entirely died out, that the suggestion of the possibility of his love re-awakening for her was startling and perplexing.

It was perplexing, too, when they idly floated, as they did now and again for the men to rest on their oars and drink champagne, to avoid meeting Frank's questioning gaze. The old love which she had had for him so long had grown faint and died so gradually, had merged, in fact, into such warm, true friendship, that he had been almost unconscious of the death of that which had been Horatia's life for a weary period. It is true that at times he had noted a change. Friendship pure and simple can never feel and never feign the engrossing, monopolising, jealous, eager interest in the thoughts and words and deeds of the friend,

that love cannot keep itself from exhibiting far too freely to the lover. He had discovered that though Mrs. Arthur Waldron was very glad to see him when he came, she was not very miserable when he stayed away; but though he had discerned this change, he was neither hurt, nor mortified, nor piqued by it. He really believed that it was due to her sense of certainty about him. He fancied that as he thoroughly intended to propose to her to become his wife by-and-bye, she had fathomed that intention, and that therefore her heart was at peace—the demons of doubt and restless, jealous anxiety exorcised, and satisfied certainty ruling in the place of suspense that was sometimes almost despair.

But her words this evening undeceived him. They showed him, without any design on her part, that he had passed out of the radius of her calculations. He knew at once that this abnegation was a genuine thing. Horatia was not a woman to feign to retire in order to make a man advance. It was a genuine thing, a reality, and no coquettish sham; and he could not refrain from fastening his eyes on hers with a look that besought her to tell him the reason why.

And she understood that questioning look, and felt sorry for him that he should care to ask, and sorry for herself that she should be compelled to answer—sorry for the change, too, in a measure. Why had it not come when she would have hailed it as her deliverer and saviour? Why had it not foreshadowed itself in those old days when to have dreamt of the possibility of one day being

indifferent to him would have been such a boon to her harassed heart? But to come now, when it would only bring disappointment to his heart, and nothing but passive peace to hers! It was hard, too hard, to be a just dispensation.

»Shall I go home with you this evening?« he asked, as she was going into the carriage that was waiting for them, and before she could say »yes,« Gilbert interposed.

»Don't think me an inhospitable brute for saying 'no' to-night Stapylton. I have something to say to her that it's time she heard, and that I can't well say before a third person. Come and lunch with us to-morrow, will you?«

»I wish he had been let come to-night, that I might have got it over,« Horatia thought; and then she let herself drift away into a sea of conjecture and dread about her brother's promised communication. »I do hope that he is not going to tell me that it's his feeling for Cecil that is driving him from the country,« she thought. »She is such an unworthy object for a man to develop constancy about. I'm glad poor Frank got over that, at any rate—though he isn't much wiser now.« And then she sighed sorrowfully, partly from fatigue, and partly because she had a dim sense that she really deserved to be made unhappy, because she was not ready to take the good the gods were willing to give her. Her long, full-drawn sigh depressed her brother, filling him as it did with dismal forebodings of the reception she would give to his news—with dismal forebodings as to the wisdom of the fact which he

was about to communicate—with drear doubts as to the advisability of anything he had ever done or intended to do—and with a dire, rapidly-dawning conviction that perfect happiness and contentment with all things would no more be his portion in the New World than they had been in the Old.

He was about to leave England in two or three days, in order to go out to New York and carry out a commercial scheme which had been projected by a company of which he was the principal part. It was not this fact which he shrank from communicating to his sister. She knew this well, and had talked to him about it a great deal, discussing it rather aggravatingly, from the real womanly point of view, and arguing that as he had so much money already, why should he seek to increase his capital in a sphere and by means that were not congenial to him? It was not this plan of self-expatriation that he had to submit to her; but it was something that kept him strangely silent at they drove home, and his silence steeped her in a sort of hazy, wondering mood, that caused her to seem absent, and made him fear, with a pang, that she would be unsympathetic.

Unsympathetic about what? Aye, that she would know far too soon for her sisterly satisfaction.

They had a late repast that night, a meal that was dinner in substance and supper in seeming—a free, fetterless sort of meal, at which they were not restrained from speech, or constrained to take that which they did not want, by the presence of servants. And it was towards the

close of this out-of-course banquet that Gilbert Denham said—

»Horry, I'm going to tell you a decision I've come to lately. When you hear it, bear in mind that *you* are the only person, the only consideration in the world that has made me waver as to my own wisdom in having come to it.«

He spoke earnestly, and she was thrown off her balance at once.

»Gilbert, whatever you have done or are going to do must be right, and the best thing, I'm sure of that. But—you haven't been rash, have you, dear?«

»I don't know what you will think when you know all about it,« he said, with a gasp and an effort.

»You have wished that I would marry again.«

»I have, I have; but, Gilbert, forgive me, I hope you have chosen some one who is so essential to your happiness, so sure to conduce to it, as to make it unimportant to you whether I subscribe heartily to the new scheme or not. I shall be glad, proud to hear you say, 'Here is my bride; renounce me if you don't rely upon her as thoroughly as I do.' It's what a man ought to feel for the woman he marries.«

She spoke with a sort of panting enthusiasm. She was so very anxious that her brother should mate himself metely this second time. She started, visibly shocked, as though she had received a showerbath, when in answer to her appeal he said—

»Your opinion can never be unimportant to me, Horry. I hope it won't be a very bad one

of the whole business, when I tell you that I am going to marry Emmeline Vicary.«

His sister could not control her nerves; they would betray the surprise, the almost horror she felt. But she could and she did control her tongue. She recovered her breath with a sigh, and as she did not break the silence he went on—

»It must all seem very strange to you; it does to myself at times; but I have not been so madly rash as you are certainly justified in supposing me to be. You remember that time I saw her in the Row that last time I was out with poor Cecil? Well, appearances were against her, as I told you, and I was sorry for her, as any man would have been for a woman who had loved him as she undoubtedly had loved me. So I found her out, and discovered that it was only appearances that were against her. In her ignorance of the ways of the world, she took dubious means to attain an end that was not altogether unjustifiable in her position. 'My mother is always throwing in my teeth that I'm a burthen to her, and that it's through me we shall taste poverty again,' she said. 'She says if I show myself in the Park some rich fool may take a fancy to and make me his wife. It doesn't matter to me; my feelings are all blunted, and I've nothing more to lose.'

»I was sorry for her, very sorry for her; she spoke and she looked restless, but through all her restlessness there ran the strong vein of genuine liking for me. She had done wrong, and I had been the means of her wrong-doing, and her mother's, being discovered, but she never gave me

one reproach, or seemed to have one hard thought about me; one isn't loved like that every day; it told on me in time. Without having any definite aim I let myself drift along, seeing her often, finding out, gradually, that there was a fine original nature, perverted as it had been by training and education and example; and at last I took the leap, and asked her to be my wife. Her devotion to me is absolute. We shall begin our new life with as fair a chance of happiness, perhaps, as most people, for we shall begin it in a place where there will be no knowledge of her past life to prejudice people against her, and mortify me.«

He ceased speaking, and looked wistfully at his sister, and she went over to him and kissed him, and wished him happiness firmly, and felt the while that the ground had been cut from under her feet completely by this last announcement of his. The home over which Emmeline Vicary presided, could never be a home for her and her children, however excellent a person love might cause Emmeline to develop into. She constrained herself, and would utter no word of censure to her brother now. But she knew that his wife would be a barrier between Gilbert and herself, and she did feel terribly alone in the world.

In her bewilderment she felt a return of the old craving for Frank Stapylton's sympathy—a return of the old longing to tell him of all that interested her, and concerned her nearly—a positive need of friendly companionship in this unexpected trouble of hers.

»He likes Gilbert, and will never say anything

cutting or unkind, and yet he will know so well what I must feel about it,« she said to herself as she sat alone that night pondering over all the changes that had been wrought in the affairs of those who were dearest and nearest to her during the last two years. And when she did rouse herself from her somewhat gloomy meditations at last, it was with a return to the old glad conviction that at least she could rely in full security on Frank Stapylton.

He came to luncheon the next day as had been arranged, and all things were in favour of his scheme of happiness at any rate. Horatia was openly anxious to greet him, openly glad to see him—impatient to tell him her news—and Gilbert was absent on duty with Miss Vicary.

She told him »all about it« in the eager disjointed way in which people do tell facts to a sympathetic auditor of whom they are sure, and he listened as eagerly and responded as heartily as even she could desire. And she pleaded her brother's cause so warmly and so well, that Frank soon found himself declaring that »Gilbert was quite right—that a wife who loved him was more to a man than the world's approval, and that altogether in this world of folly and sin, that human being is the wisest and the best who realizes before it is too late that love is enough.«

All the surrounding conditions were in his favour, and she had not the heart nor the wish to break one of them. The reign of romance might be over with her, but reason told her that she would be infinitely happier with Frank than

without him, and that, after all, good had come out of that exaggerated longing for Larpington which had carried her down to watch on the spot where first she had known Frank Stapylton.

That the hope still lives that when Cecil dies little Gerald's claim as next of kin will be established to the Larpington estates is only natural. But it is no longer the engrossing hope of her life. For she is the well-cared-for wife of a wealthy man who will take better care of her children's future, even should that poor creature in the asylum linger on for years.

As for Gilbert he is thriving, prosperous, satisfied, and perfectly contented with a wife who worships him, while Frank is thriving, prosperous, and perfectly satisfied with a wife whom he worships. In matrimony, as in friendship and love, to be perfectly happy, one of the firm must feel and act on the feeling that it is »more blessed to give than to receive.«

THE END.

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